



**FRANK
T. KLUS**

**AZALEAS
DON'T
BLOOM
HERE**

A DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

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A Dystopian Novel

Frank T. Klus

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*This book is dedicated to my sister,
Marianne, who so loved my first
book.*

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Preface

This is a work of fiction. It is not a prediction of what is to come, but a warning of what may come. All names are fictional and any resemblance to actual people is purely coincidental. Some geographic places are completely fictional.

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PART I:
RADICALIZING EUGENE SULKE

CHAPTER 1

THE END

Old Chicago, The Dead District, July 2065

All that was is gone. All that remains is a monument to the past; a testament to what was. The skyscrapers along Michigan Avenue became tombstones, and a once thriving business district lay empty and dead.

The streets are pot-holed and broken. Weeds grow out of the cracks, and no traffic traverses the boulevard. Looking up, the high rises are grey and dead, towering above, and occasionally dropping its debris like a giant animal disposing its waste. Looking down the street, one sees missing street signs, broken street lamps, and the occasional junker on the side of what used to be a road.

In these monuments, where once an ornate stairwell stood as a testament of wealth and power, it now represents impoverishment and uselessness. In the old offices, tall windows that once stood grand watch over the bustling traffic below, now display only busted shards of glass. The pristine walls are covered with dirt, grime, and graffiti. Oak desks sit rotted and broken, and the once polished floors are caked with dirt, branches and leaves.

Office doors are open and broken, and everywhere there is the stench of animal and human feces mixed with liquor brought in by squatters. Their leftover crumbs attract the rats that scurry across the spoiled floors. In massive open offices the artificial partitions are gone. The tiles on the ceiling are bent, twisted, broken, and missing; and everywhere, the stale smells of abandonment flourish. All that's left are the ghostly signs of life here: an exit sign, a desk chair, an empty coffee urn, and the skeletal remains of a once thriving member of society, still sitting at his desk.

Outside, the storefront windows along the neighborhood streets are boarded up. Keep Out signs are posted on the doors. Cobwebs replace the

merchandise, and prostitutes and their johns are the new customers. In the shadows, drug addicts and their junkies would become the new trade, and where ladies once tried on their new gowns, the gamblers rolled their dice.

Outside there is an eclectic mixture of putrefying smells like cooked up dumpster divings; maybe spiced up with skunk juice. The stench suggests it must have been sautéed over a dead carcass from something washed out of the polluted river and...well, you get the idea.

This part of the city, the dead district, as the mayor called it, wasn't completely dead. People are here, and there is noise. Talking and squawking, arguing and fussing over homemade music. They laugh and cry, yell and cajole, like regular people, but something isn't quite right. They are dirty and feckless; their movements meandering and pointless. They are indigent, homeless, and lifeless. They were hordes walking aimlessly and listlessly in search of food, work, water, or shade. Where once they planned and hoped, they now improvised and feared.

At the west end of the street the old residential buildings once housed the affluent, who left when the jobs at the other end of the street did so. The largest is the Hollins-Sloop Condominiums. Built as the answer to the city's housing shortage at one hundred five stories, it's called Howling Slums now by the squatters that live there, and bears all the scars of urban decay: graffiti, grease, grime, and boarded over and broken windows. Laundry hangs over the balcony rails, and there is no electricity or running water in the junk-strewn units.

At night, one can hear the yelling, cajoling, and the pleading of the squatters. A wino would crawl out to the balcony and salute the night. A fight would break out and a woman would scream. Garbage would rain down from above like some medieval disposal system. By day, everyone left; too hot, too suffocating.

July was a brutal time of the year where temperatures would often sore to a hundred degrees so often it felt normal. There was no future and no past for these denizens. There was only now. Every day was the same: relentless, certain, exhausting, draining. Get some food, get to the water, hold your nose, stay together, and find some work to do. Yesterday felt like today and no one thought about tomorrow.

The unrelenting present consumed every thought and every desire. For most of them the present need was food: scarce, expensive, and hoarded. The spring storms would bring heavy rain that moved the debris around and

washed the pollutants from the air, but it moved planting season farther back into the year. Summer droughts and heatwaves, punctuated by vicious storms, often ruined the crops.

Most of the family farms that dotted the countryside and the rural areas of Illinois went broke more than a generation ago. Corporate farms bought them because they could afford the expensive irrigation to make the farms work, but produce was exported only to the people who could afford it. Long haul trucks didn't make it to the dead districts, which now made up two-thirds of Old Chicago proper.

Crafty people with running pickups would go to the corporate warehouses and purchase fruits, vegetables, grains, and meats; and then truck them to the cartwheelers. These were enterprising people who would work for the pickup truck people, carting their goods throughout the neighborhood. They'd buy the stuff that was ready to be thrown out, and sell to anyone with money, or trade with each other. Hawking their wares, these mean streets would be a noisy cacophony of sales pitches, arguments, music, and fights.

The children were born with no knowledge of anything different outside of when their grandparents would tell them stories of television, vacations, shopping, and going to work each day. The grandchildren would listen with amusement as they heard that people had to pay for the right to live where they were, and they howled when they heard they had to work all day so they could give other people their money. On rare occasion they would hear of a mysterious place called the New World that was like their grandparent's world, and wondered who'd want to go there.

To the young generation, this was their world, and it felt normal. They would work, play, and occasionally learn to read, while mom and dad would forage for food. Money was rare and many children in the neighborhood never saw it. If you wanted something, you gave something in return. Children would go to the makeshift stores the truck people set up in the abandoned shops, fetch the merchandise, and bring it back to the cartwheelers. The cartwheelers, in turn, would give the kids fruit or candy.

Down by the lake, the teeming masses would gather on the muddy beaches to play, swim, and wash their clothes. The educated people would create informal schools to teach the children how to read, write, and do some "figurin". The public schools were mostly boarded up now, replaced by private and semi-private ones. They were supposed to provide free

tuition, but the modern educators would seek all sorts of special fees from the students. The poor couldn't afford them, fell behind, and abandoned an education altogether.

There wasn't as big a need for teachers anymore, so many were dismissed. The best ones could get good-paying jobs in the private and semi-private schools, but many created outdoor schools to teach the children in parks and beaches. Most couldn't afford to pay much, so teachers took fresh food as payment.

Crime was everywhere. Without jobs, young people would join gangs and rob the cartwheelers of their property. There weren't many of the old police anymore. They were replaced by roving groups of paramilitary organizations. The Lightning Squad patrolled this side of the city, but they charged the cartwheelers for the privilege of providing security. If they couldn't afford to pay them, they had to provide for their own security. Many couldn't; many wouldn't.

Is the dead district a sign of the decline and fall of the American Empire? Did some invading horde from the dark realm conquer and impose misery upon them? It wasn't supposed to be this way. These denizens were the freest of people, the most powerful, and the most entrepreneurial. They couldn't lose. They were the magnet for opportunists, industrialists, consumers, and immigrants. They were the best of the best, those who could not lose, and had the will to win, to conquer, and to destroy anyone who would threaten their great nation.

Minds were made up and truth emerged. This would be the age of entrepreneurship. Lose the notion of finding a job, and create one instead. Unemployment was the fate of the lazy; certainly not the responsibility of government. Unemployment rates? No one knew. No one counted anymore.

Business regulations were an impediment to success. Get rid of them! That was the clarion call. Taxes choked off success. Get rid of taxes on the successful; let the lazy and indigent pay them.

Government handouts only encourage indolence. Get rid of them! If there are no government handouts, one has to create a job. If one couldn't do that, too bad. Save the money to help out the thrivers. Help them boost their trade, replenish their inventory, and procure more markets. This is what success looks like—reward the winners and punish the losers.

Schools should be built for children from successful parents. It's wasted on society's failures. Years of high dropout rates, failing pupils and poor

test scores became proof that the public school system was broken and needed to be shut down. Create schools for the successful, and one can guarantee success.

So what went wrong?

Nothing went wrong, one would hear. They have NOGOV. With one hand on the pulse of the economy and another on the government, they would keep things right. Consisting of a group of the most powerful men in America, they knew the truth. That truth would be relayed to the political pundits, reporters, and educators. Things would be set right. Radio, television, newspapers, and the internet would be the shining beacon relaying the absolute truth to the thriving masses.

So what of the “tombstones” one may ask?

They were abandoned to escape the plague of illiteracy, sloth, and weak minds. Businesses moved where there were better opportunities. The truth is, according to those who know, is that the dead districts were created by the diseased; the people that can't; the people that won't. Those that will not, never will. Those who fail now, will always fail. The tombstones are a monument to the slothful, the lazy, and the apathetic; certainly not any failure of the truth everyone was so certain of.

So where do the successful people live now?

Most went to the suburbs, but the real goal was getting to the Fortress—now that represented opportunity. Looking like a medieval city from the outside, the brick walls, thirty-seven feet high, rise with sublime splendor above the rotting city. They were designed to keep the hordes of the hungry out while creating rich and lovely communities for the thriving affluent. They had the sandy white shores of Lake Michigan at the east end, a giant mall in the middle, and mansions decorated the lush lawns.

Walled off from the detritus, these bastions of economic boom still held the promise of prosperity, and would be gawked at and glorified by the grungy dwellers nearby. They'd see some big, shiny black car driving in and out of the ornate gates and yell, hoot, whistle, and laugh at this strange instrument of wealth and power. The relationship these people on one side of the wall had with those of the other side was like a Dickensian tale of the haves and have-nothings; the wealthy and the wretched.



Everson Consulting occupied the top stories of the Solariano Building that stood guard over the Fortress in what was left of the business district in the city. Standing before the massive window of the conference room, Eugene Sulke stood in his starched saffron shirt and amethyst tie and stared twenty-one stories below, wearing a serious expression.

Standing next to him was his boss, Stuart Everson. Eugene made a point of going to the same hair stylist as his superior, mentor, and hero. He wore his hair the same way—slightly longish and wavy, but still in his mid-forties, he had his golden-dyed locks instead of Stu’s silver hair. Both had pot bellies, a sign of affluence in these times, and wore finely tailored clothes to mark their success.

Stu playfully poked Eugene in the ribs. With a sly smirk and a sideways glance, Stu leaned over and said, “Thank heavens for the Fortress. Honestly, I don’t know how those other people can live that way. Look at them, Gene: dirty, naked, illiterate. Thank God I have the Fortress.”

“Sure is something, Stu.”

Stu smiled. “Why don’t you and Catherine come over for Labor Day—one final barbecue for the summer?”

“Sure, Stu. We’d love to.”

Eugene had been inside the Fortress many times, and dreamed of being vice president with a home inside it one day, but a sudden chill overtook him as he turned his head to the dirty and naked people outside. *Could we be responsible?*

CHAPTER 2

AN OLD FRIEND

Eugene raced to his car through the empty parking lot. His valise was bouncing off his right leg, and his oversized belly flapped against him. Sweat stained his shirt and poured off his forehead. His face was flushed and his heart pounded against his chest. It was late; very late as he reached the car door. With tires squealing, he headed for the open road.

A quarter past seven. Oh why did they keep me so long? They must have known it was getting late. South side of Old Chicago and it's fifteen minutes before sunset. Fifteen minutes! How long to the Tri-State? Yeah, I could do it. I just need a break with the lights.

As Eugene reached the first traffic light, it turned red. *Great! Come on, come on. Give me a few breaks. Come on green, come on.* The light turned green; the tires screeched.

Eugene glanced at the speedometer; fifty, maybe fifty-five. *Forty mile speed zone. Don't let the Lightning Squad see me. They'll ticket me for speeding, and then jail me for violating curfew. Oh why did they keep me so long? Come on green. Why did they keep me so long, answering senseless questions; questions I already answered? Just let me make it home.*

It was now twenty-five past seven, and probably several more minutes from the Tri-State Tollway. There was no other traffic and Eugene began to relax.

Just then he heard the whistles of the Lightning Squad. His pulse rose again. *Did the sun set yet? What's my speed? Damn!* One motorcycle passed him and moved just ahead of him, another moved alongside him and motioned for him to pull over, while the third parked right behind him. There was nowhere to go. He had been triangulated; the classic position of the Lightning Squad.

Eugene waited. The cyclists were heavily armed with semi-automatic weapons strung around their shoulders. The middle cycle now pulled

alongside Eugene, and its driver dismounted. He took off his helmet, grinning. Eugene's frown began to melt. *Dennis O'Reilly. Oh my God.*

Dennis and Eugene were childhood friends, but Eugene hadn't seen him since he moved away from Countryside.

"Hey, speeder, how's it going?"

Eugene climbed out of his Lexus and extended a hand. "Dennis O'Reilly. I didn't think I'd ever see you again. I hope I'm not in too much trouble. I was just trying to make it out of the city before curfew."

"Nah. We're buddies. I don't think you would have made it anyway, Genie, my man. You see, most of the squads sit at the entrance ramps of the interstate. Even if the sun is still up they'd still stop and ticket you. They'll just say you'd still be in their territory after curfew."

"What's curfew for anyway?"

"Keeps crime down. Just between us, it also boosts revenue for the Squad. Everyone's out in full force near dusk, trying to catch somebody on their way home from work."

"So how come you aren't monitoring the ramps?"

"I was looking after you, Genie."

"Me?"

"That's a little hard to explain," Dennis said. "I tell you what, why don't you come over to my house Saturday afternoon for a barbeque, say about twelve?"

Dennis gave him his business card. He lived on the south side of Old Chicago. Dennis sensed his friend's fear.

"Don't worry, my man. I live in one of the better neighborhoods, and I'll make sure you get home safely."

"Okay."

"Great! Now we'll give you an escort to the 294, before the bad weather hits." Eugene looked at the sky. A thunderhead rolled above; a storm was coming.



Home was West Chicago. The affluent built a walled community about twenty years ago because blight was attacking the old district. Catherine was in the study working on some papers for the school she taught in.

“Hi, hon,” he said, as he reached down and kissed her.

“Hi, sweetie,” she said as she kissed him back. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Guess who I met on the way home?” Eugene explained all that happened, but he noticed that Catherine’s cheerful countenance turned sour upon hearing Dennis’s name. “What’s wrong?”

Catherine forced a smile. “Nothing. It’s just that...oh, never mind. Let me check on dinner.”

Catherine straightened out her desk and made her way to the kitchen. Eugene grabbed the evening paper and sat down in his favorite chair in the living room. It was an expensive overstuffed brown leather recliner. He opened the paper and began to read.

Senate to Take up Welfare Omnibus

“Hey, Cath! Did you see tonight’s paper?”

Catherine came into the living room. “Yeah, it looks like they may get rid of welfare altogether now.”

“First they roll everything into one omnibus package, and now they’re going to get rid of that too.”

“We knew that was going to happen.”

“Some guy was urging government to get rid of it on the radio today.”

“It’s like you always said—first they get people riled up about something; then it’s easy to change the law.”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s what Professor Zinney always said. When NOGOV wants something done, they put the word out in the media. The media plays it up big time; then NOGOV goes to the government and demands they do something about it.”

Catherine just shook her head in disgust. “A regular racket.”



Eugene and Catherine sat down to a pork chop dinner and salad. Catherine liked to set out candles on the polished oak table, dining as if they were in a cozy restaurant. They ate in quiet until Eugene broke the silence. “You frowned when I mentioned Dennis.”

Catherine looked up, somewhat startled. “Did I?”

“He invited us to his house Saturday afternoon for a barbecue.”

“This Saturday? Oh, I don’t know, Gene. I have so much to do.”

“It’ll only be a couple hours. Surely, you can make time for that.”

“I’ll have to think about it. Gene...never mind.”

“That’s the second time you started to say something and changed your mind.”

Catherine flashed an embarrassing smile. “Did I?” she snickered. “I’m always doing that.”

“I couldn’t believe it when he stepped off that bike and took his helmet off,” Eugene said with a smile and a titter. “After all these years. I didn’t think I’d ever see him again. Did I ever tell you about him?”

“I think you mentioned his name one or two times.”

“We used to do everything together as kids.” Eugene was beaming. “We’d pretend to be astronauts visiting some strange and alien world.” He stopped to gobble down another bite of his pork. Catherine just picked at hers. “We’d be out in some field, playing around some drainage ditch—”

“Please,” she said.

“What’s wrong? You used to love hearing my stories.”

Catherine perked up again. “Oh, I’m sorry, hon. I guess I just let my mind wander.”

Eugene tried to continue, but Catherine pushed her plate away.



By midweek, Catherine had made some excuse to bow out of the barbecue, and encouraged Gene not to go either. “He’s Lightning Squad,” she said.

“So what.”

“Please, Gene—just make up some excuse. Let’s go out together. We haven’t done that in a long time.”

Eugene frowned. “Cath, I want to see him. And what does the Lightning Squad have to do with anything?”

Catherine started to smile, but her face was flushed, and her mood quickly turned somber. She didn't answer.

When Saturday came, Eugene asked Catherine to call him about three o'clock to ask him to come home. "This way I'll have an excuse to get out of there. When I come home we can go out, okay?" Catherine seemed to stare right past him.

Eugene frowned. "Please don't go out drinking today." Catherine continued staring into the unknown.

CHAPTER 3: INTO THE LAIR

Gene got into his Lexus and started driving down the highway. He turned the radio on, and a commercial was playing. Gene rolled his eyes and looked up at a billboard.

This section of the Tri-State Tollway is presented by Parker's Whole Milk

He rubbed his nose. *Was it all worth it?* It was his company that encouraged the state to privatize the tollways as a way of raising revenue without increasing taxes.

The commercial was still playing so he changed stations and picked up a conservative talk radio show.

“I tell you folks, it's the poor. They're ruining this country. They don't want to work; they drop out of school; and they suck from the government's teat. I tell you

folks, something's got to be done about them.

“These people don't want to work or can't work. They drop out of school; they take after their welfare-driven parents; they commit crimes to get even more money; then they use that to buy drugs. It's disgusting folks, but I, Joseph P. Barnum, have the solution. Get rid of welfare altogether. No money, no drugs.

“I'm tired of government spending mine and your hard-working money on these slime balls. That's right folks. You heard me—slime balls. That's what they are, and that's what they always will be.”

Eugene just smiled and changed the station.

“Know someone who belongs in jail? Call 1-800-GO2-JAIL. Now, there’s justiceforall.com. With the shortage of judges, let our officers of the court take care of your problem. And when we put your problem away, you get paid! Just call 1-800-GO2-JAIL. We keep the jails full and you safe. So call today and get paid.”

Yeah, just put your problem in jail. What a laugh!



It took more than a half hour before Eugene reached Dennis’s neighborhood. *This can’t be right.* The streets were filled with potholes. The shops looked ill-kempt. The streets in the marketplace were fairly empty with only a few people ambling about. They didn’t seem to be going anywhere, stopping frequently; occasionally, talking to others and sometimes to themselves.

Where am I? Great! No street sign. He came across a strip mall with only two cars in the parking lot. Only a laundromat was open. A convenient store was boarded up. The signage was terrible; old and faded. He glanced

down at his navigation screen to see what street he was on. Then—“Turn right on Pierce Lane.” Some man was snoozing against a decaying building to his left, while another one stretched out on a sidewalk nearby.

Eugene kept going until he almost ran into zombies. It was his description for the aimless wanderers of the streets. They didn't seem to care that they were in the street in front of Eugene. He tooted his horn and a couple of them turned around to give him a dirty look. One or two moved to the side but the rest just stared at him, wondering what he was doing in their hood.

As Eugene slowly edged past them he heard a banging on his car window. “Got a cigarette, man?” a scuzzy looking guy with large tattoos around his neck said. Eugene kept going.

Then he heard someone pounding on the back of his car. “Nice car. Can I have some C?”

Then another guy shouted from his left side. “You got a spliff?”

Eugene sped up past them, and through a few potholes. *Where the hell am I?* There was more of the same as he continued to drive. At one point the road began disintegrating. Weeds began popping up in the middle of the street. As he continued on, there was less pavement and more greenery. He backed up and went another direction. Once more, weeds began replacing pavement. Eugene could sense his nerves jangling. There was an eerie silence. His heart began racing when he looked ahead and saw a pack of zombies moving eastward. He quickly braked and spun around to find a new direction. His GPS gave him new directions, but it was directing him to another dead end.

Eugene stopped and got out. There was an eerie loneliness; a fear that he was lost in a dead district. He rifled through his wallet looking for his friend's business card, but when he found it there was no phone number. “I'm lost,” he muttered to himself. Eugene resolved to resume his old direction, hoping not to be seen by the seemingly mindless horde. He heard many stories of zombie packs attacking cars on the road. They surround the car because one couldn't go very fast on the poor roads. They'd pull the driver out, rob him and trash his car. Anything on his possession had value to these guys. Eugene knew to stay clear of them. He was relieved when he got to Dennis's block.

His friend's house looked like it had been built in the early fifties of the last century. It still had the aluminum siding that was popular in its day, but

it was dull and cracked now. There was an eerie silence. *Where are the children? Where are the people?* Eugene parked his car. He walked to the front door, but turned around a couple times to look at his car, and then up and down the street. He felt his heart beating a little faster.



Dennis greeted him with a warm man hug. He was tall and angular, and his muscular frame reminded Eugene of his friend as a kid. Dennis was the tallest and strongest kid on the block, except maybe for his younger brother, Ray.

“Hope you didn’t have too much trouble finding us,” he said. “The streets can be a bit tricky.”

“It was a little tricky, but I know the way now,” Gene said.

“This is my wife, Teresa.”

Teresa greeted him as if she had known him for years. “Where’s your wife, Gene?”

“Oh, she has her hobbies and visits friends on weekends,” he lied.

“Oh, that’s too bad. I would have enjoyed meeting her.”

“I’ll be sure to bring her the next time I come over.”

Teresa was a nice looking woman, around 40, with short black hair and grey eyes. Her dress had a small hole in the sleeve that Eugene noticed when she raised her arms. There were also loose threads and a faded appearance.

They went into the enclosed front porch, which Dennis had turned into a kind of all-purpose room: part den and part family room. There was a round, plain white table in the center of the room with a settee in front of it, and against the wall of the interior of the house. Opposite the table were a couple of lawn chairs sitting side-by-side against the far wall. There was an old fashioned TV, looking like an antique, set to the right of the room as one walked in. A picture window showed Front Street and the sidewalk. Above the window were three pictures that fascinated Eugene.

“Remember President Cummstaff?” Dennis said with a big grin on his face. “Greatest president the country ever had.”

“Yeah, I wrote a paper on him when I was in college. You know, Dennis, I never thought of him as a great president.” Dennis frowned.

“He was the first president to begin undermining New America, and reducing communication with it.” Eugene suddenly realized that he was offending his friend. Teresa also looked puzzled.

“But, maybe, he was just what the country needed.” Dennis and Teresa both perked up.

The next picture was of the Lightning Squad pulling some guy over. The squad leader was pointing his rifle at the car they triangulated.

“Lieutenant Barnett gave me that picture,” Dennis said. “That’s him when he was a squad leader, like me.” Under the picture was the caption:

Power grows out of the barrel of a gun

Finally, to the right, was a painting of a junkyard dog behind a steel fence with vicious canine teeth that looked twice the size of the real thing. Under it was the caption:

Protection is Freedom

The pictures put Eugene on edge, but the friendliness of Dennis and Teresa, who welcomed him like a long-lost son, quickly brought him back.

A baby’s cry sent Teresa into the interior of the house. As Dennis and Eugene continued to talk, Teresa came back a short time later holding a baby.

“Jerrell just woke up and I have to feed him,” Teresa said. “He’s really a good boy; hardly ever cries.” She gave Dennis and Eugene each a glass and a bottle of beer, sat down, and began discreetly breastfeeding the infant.

“How old is Jerrell?”

“Just two months old,” Teresa said. “We’ve only been married for two years.”

“We met when I pulled her over for speeding,” Dennis said.

“Isn’t that hysterical?” she said, laughing. “He was so tall and handsome in his uniform.”

“All brown and blue. An ugly combination of colors if there ever was one—brown for military, and blue for justice.” Dennis was chuckling.

“Just look at that cute dimple on his chin. Doesn’t he look like Kirk Douglas?” Gene smiled, understandably. “Anyway, he started hitting on me; even asked me out. Told me he’d tear up the ticket if I agreed. What else was I to do?” Then Teresa began giggling as she pinched his cheek.

Dennis was still cackling. “I was smitten. Look at her, Gene. Have you ever seen a more beautiful smile in your life?” Teresa smiled, but one side of her mouth seemed to curl upward more than the other. Still, Eugene nodded pleasantly.

“Now tell me about Catherine,” Teresa said. “I want to know everything. How long have you been married? How’d you meet?”

“We’ve been married for almost twenty years. We met during our college days, at a seminar given by Professor Harold Zinney. You may have heard about him. He was Redd Piper’s best friend and confidant. He even helped write the Constitution for New America.”

Dennis made a face, and Eugene picked up on it. *Wasn’t Dennis a populist? The Lightning Squad was set up by populists. Still, there was that picture of Cummstaff on the wall. Wasn’t he the hero of the RAC? Of the American Party?*

Eugene continued. “She just happened to be sitting next to me. I’d seen her in a class I took the previous year, but I was shy. I wanted to talk to her, but it just seemed I never got the chance. Well, anyway, I talked to her that night. We were both populists and fans of Harold Zinney. We talked all through the seminar. You should see her, Dennis and Teresa. She has the most beautiful eyes; light blue with just a touch of grey streaks near the pupils; almond-shaped. And that lovely smile of hers; it’s perfect. But what I noticed the most were her fingers. I know how weird that must sound, but they’re so sleek and tender; so kissable; so lovable. Anyway, we began dating, and we married a few years after we got out of college. We were both twenty-five and madly in love.”

Eugene smiled gently to himself, like he was reminiscing. Teresa looked mesmerized, but Dennis’s eyes were downcast. He tried to smile, but his jaw slackened and his lower lip sagged.

“She teaches high school at St. Paul’s in Carol Stream.”

“Do you have children, Gene?” Teresa asked.

“No. We don’t want children. I think part of the reason was that we want to have fun first before having a family, but part of it is we’re afraid of bringing a child into this world. It just doesn’t feel like we would be doing the right thing. I don’t know. Now, it seems that our marriage...” Eugene stopped himself. He didn’t want to say too much. He didn’t want to spoil the day with his friends. So he just smiled while Teresa went to the fridge to get a couple more beers. Teresa just drank bottled water, and Dennis stared into the distance.

“Now, tell me, Dennis. What did you mean, the other day, when you said you were looking out for me?”

“Well, remember that incident involving your father a few months back?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“The Lightning Squad had set up roadblocks in Skokie, which they patrolled, and there was an argument involving the squad leader and your father and his passenger. It wasn’t the first run-in with the Lightning Squad, and they threatened to jail him. Your father told them he would sue. He spent the night in jail, and then was told to stay out of Skokie. I heard the story a few weeks ago and recognized this was your father. Genie, I feared that if the Lightning Squad found out your name was Sulke they’d punish you because of your father. If they caught you speeding in Squad territory, or out after curfew, they’d stop you, and that would be bad for you.

“I took advantage of the technology the Lightning Squad had, found out where you lived, and the kind of car you drive. I put a GPS transponder under your car. I knew the other night that you were running late in leaving work, and could be stopped by the Lightning Squad. So I intercepted you to give you an escort out of the city.”

Eugene looked a little nervous. “Dennis, why didn’t you just tell me you were helping me?”

Dennis looked sheepishly at his friend. “Well, Gene, maybe that’s what I should have done, but I thought your father or brother might spot me and start an argument. I just thought it easier this way. More fun too.” He began laughing, playfully pointing at his friend. “You should have seen the expression on your face when I pulled you over. Man, you looked like you’d shit.”

“Yeah, Denny, you’re probably right.”

They talked some more about their childhood years until the topic of Harold Zinney came up. “When I went to college at the University of Illinois, I found that Harold Zinney was chairman of the Political Science Department. I remembered that he was a close friend of Redd Piper and my father—at least when they were young. I just couldn’t pass up a chance to study under him. I visited him in his office so many times that we became friends. We still correspond. He turned me into a Populist, although I think I was one already at that point; but now I was sure of it. He taught me how to think. I know how strange that must sound. But he said that one must seek truth. No one, not populists, and certainly not the Corporatists, had truth on their side. Truth comes about through questioning and investigation. When it came to politics I was always investigating; always questioning.”

“So you and the professor have a pretty good relationship?”

“Oh, sure. I’ve done some work for him in terms of helping him organize his workload, and he helps me with writing up reports. I suppose I’ve asked him for help understanding a lot of the things going on in the country. He’s invited me over to his house on several occasions. He’s a terrific guy, Den.”

“Is he now?”

This unassuming question put Eugene on edge; it sounded accusatory. “You know, Dennis, I guess I just assumed you were a populist too, being in the Lightning Squad and all.”

“I’m not political. Not many of us are.”

“How did you get in with the Lightning Squad?”

“Well, a buddy of mine got a job with them, and then he got me in. That was a little over three years ago. Now I’m a squad leader.”

“What’s a squad leader?”

“It’s just the next to the lowest ranking. The lowest ranking is a pointman. A squad consists of two pointmen and the squad leader.

“The next highest ranking is Battalion Commander. This guy leads a group of twenty squads.

“Then comes the Lieutenant, who leads a brigade. This is all the battalions in a given territory, like the south side of Old Chicago.

“Above him is a Captain that heads a district. This is a group of brigades. He runs a given territory, like Old Chicago/Indiana District.

“Then the General runs a zone, consisting of a number of districts. My general is Bezz Holder. He runs the Great Lakes Zone.

“Finally, there is the Commandant, who runs the entire Squad.

“In addition, there is a hierarchy for the political and the judicial systems.”

“Gene’s not really interested in all that, honey,” Teresa said. “Dennis is expecting a new promotion soon.” She giggled as she spoke.

“I’m hoping to make brigade commander. With more pay, we can afford to move out to the burbs.”

“It’s our dream,” she said. “Honey, maybe you should start the grill now. I’m sure Gene’s getting hungry.”

“Oh, you’re right. I forgot about the time. You hungry, Genie?”

“Sure am!”

“Well, I hope so, my man, because I got three T-bones that are just waiting to be seared on the grill.”

Dennis and Eugene walked out to the backyard and Dennis fired up the grill while Teresa prepared the fixings. The men talked a little sports and tossed a football around before eating. After polishing off the steaks, Teresa sat down with her magazines, and Dennis and Eugene got into more serious talk.

“How’s your brother, Ray, doing?” Eugene asked. “I thought he’d be here.” Dennis’s brows furrowed, and his jaw tightened.

“That’s kind of a sore subject with Dennis,” Teresa said.

“I don’t see him much,” Dennis said—his voice slightly gruffer. “We kicked him out of the Squad for, let us say, unsavory behavior.”

“Wha...what did he do?”

“Killed a bunch of people,” Teresa said.

Eugene thought better of asking any more questions. There was a pause as the trio thought of a better subject to talk about. Finally, Dennis turned to Eugene. “Ever think about going to the new country, Gene?”

“Oh, I supposed it had crossed my mind a time or two. I’ve talked about it with Harold Zinney, and he’s largely in the same situation as me. We both have good jobs, and we’re unlikely to give them up so easily.” Eugene paused and decided he wanted to get Dennis’s take. “So, what do you think of the new country?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s a commie country, and it may well have some good points. Certainly, it has helped a lot of people, but I really don’t know

much about it.”

“I don’t know much about it either except for what Professor Zinney said about it.”

“What was that?”

“They have no unemployment to speak of; no slums; and people make good money.”

“I’ve heard that. I’m not sure I believe it, though. I also heard that you have to buy your job and then you can have it for life. Now, Genie, you’re a businessman; got an MBA and all. Does that sound like any way to run a business? I mean, what happens if the business isn’t doing well? It’s not like you can just lay people off. They’ll scream at you about being an owner. Christ, man, how can such a place survive?”

“Every place would deal with problems in their own way, but what I do know is that the worker/owners get to decide for themselves. They may elect to slow down production. They may decide on a four day work week. They may choose to export more products. They may resolve to lower their prices to increase their market share. Whatever they agree on, the point is, they get to decide it; not shareholders or some CEO.”

“Well, you’re more of an expert than I’ll ever be, but it just seems like it would be better to layoff some people then for no one to get paid.”

“It does sound like a problem, but New America seems to be doing a pretty good job of handling it.”

“But how do you know, Gene? There isn’t much information coming out of that place except that everything is all hunky dory.” Dennis got up to stretch and then turned to Eugene. “That place scares me, Gene. No one really knows what is going on there. People who go there don’t come back.”

They talked for hours and Gene totally forgot about Catherine. He looked at his watch and it was almost four o’clock. Dennis sensed he might be anxious to get home. “There’s still time before curfew.”

Eugene smiled and slapped himself on the knee. “I promised Catherine I’d be home before too long. We’re going out tonight.” He got up and stretched. “It’s so good seeing you again. Teresa, you’ve got a good man, here.”

“I know. Why don’t you come over again next Saturday and bring Catherine?” she said.

“I’d rather return the favor and have you come out to West Chicago. I promise to get you home before curfew.” They all laughed and agreed.

Dennis and Teresa watched as Eugene climbed into the Lexus and drove off. Teresa turned and looked at her husband. Dennis sat silently in his chair, staring ahead with a stern countenance.

“I thought it went well,” Teresa said.

Dennis continued to stare ahead, now expressionless. Finally, he took a deep breath and turned to his wife. “I have to find a way to spy on Eugene’s and Zinney’s conversations.”

Teresa wore a coy smile as she stared at the street. “I don’t think you have to worry about that at all, dear. Ray is the bigger issue.” Then she turned her eyes toward him. “He’ll meet him, you know.”

CHAPTER 4:

FRIEND OR FOE

When Eugene got home Catherine was nowhere to be found. He felt disappointed she wasn't there. He looked forward to going out with her, but now he figured Catherine was drinking, and he was upset that he couldn't depend on her. He began regretting that he invited Dennis and Teresa up to West Chicago. *What if Catherine gets drunk or is not around? It would be an embarrassment. What would Dennis and Teresa think?*

Eugene lived in an upscale neighborhood. It was walled off in semi-imitation of the Fortress, and copied what many middle class residents were doing to wall themselves away from the deteriorating regions around them. His home was fairly new, built about ten years ago, when they expanded the town. It consists of three bedrooms, one converted to a workshop by Catherine, and two full baths. His basement was converted to a bar, half bath, and recreation room. Eugene would often sit in the living room with a glass of wine, listening to Sibelius or Vivaldi; often reflecting on some problem at work.

What occupied his thoughts now was Catherine. *Where is she?* He poured himself a drink, put on some music, but couldn't take any satisfaction as he sat in the recliner. He turned off the music and went out onto the veranda and looked forward to Catherine's return, but she did not return. As day gave way to night, Eugene finally went inside. He had a look at television, the newspaper, more music, and no Catherine. Eugene worried. *Where is she?*



On Monday morning Eugene got up first and made his own breakfast. He finished, and was drinking a cup of coffee when Catherine came down. She'd been gone all weekend.

“Good morning, honey,” Eugene said. “Want some breakfast?”

“No, I’m not hungry, but I could use a cup of coffee.” Catherine looked wan and languid with bags under her eyes.

Eugene got her a cup and thought about making a fresh pot for her hangover. “Dennis and his wife, Teresa, were looking forward to meeting you Saturday.” Catherine pursed her lips as she looked up at him.

“Well, you’ll get a chance to meet them next Saturday. They’re coming over for a barbecue around twelve. Will you be here? It’ll be embarrassing for me if you’re not.”

“I don’t like the idea of them coming to our house. And I don’t think you should be seeing them.”

“What are you talking about? What do you know of them? They’re nice people.”

“They aren’t like us. They aren’t populists.”

“I know they aren’t. Neither are my parents or Bo. What am I supposed to do, not see them either?”

“That’s different and you know it. It’s different with him. He’s in the Lightning Squad.”

“How did you know they aren’t populists? I only realized that Saturday, when I visited them.” Catherine didn’t respond. Eugene could tell she was holding something back. “How did you know?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I can’t just uninvite them.” He got up from the table and began skulking around the kitchen. *How does she know about them?*

“Yes, you can. Do it! Make something up.”

“That’s enough!” raising his voice. “I don’t know what’s the matter with you. We used to know everything about each other. Now I don’t know what is getting into your head anymore. You come home drunk, if you come home at all. What the hell is going on?” Catherine began sobbing.

“What’s going on, Cath?” He set his cup down and crossed over to her side of the table. He grabbed a chair, sat down, and then leaned over to her. “We talked about AA.”

“It won’t help,” Catherine said. She turned to Eugene. Her face was flushed and tense; her voice rushed and desperate. “Please don’t let them come over, Gene. You don’t know them.”

“You sound like you do. Do you?”

“I only know who they pretend to be.”

“You’re not making any sense. How do you know about them?”

“I have to go,” she said, shaking her head. She pushed her chair back abruptly and left the kitchen.

“No. I need to know how you know so much,” he said as he followed her into the foyer.

Catherine fished for her car keys from the little tray, but her sharp jabs almost knocked the knickknack over. Eugene approached her quizzically.

“Please, Gene,” she said, half pleading; half shouting. “I’ve told you all that I can. Please, please, Gene, don’t bring them here. Please don’t do this. I...”

“I what?” Gene walked over to where Catherine was standing and put his arm around her.

She turned her head away from him and sighed. “I can’t go on.” She paused and turned to him. “Gene, listen to me. I love you, but you have to get out!”

“Get out of where? Please tell me what is going on with you.”

“I can’t,” she said almost whimpering. “I have to go.”

“I think this is the alcohol talking. You sound like a crazy person. Look, I’ll make a deal with you. If you promise to go to AA meetings, I’ll promise not to see Dennis again.”

Catherine’s eyes opened dejectedly. “I can’t.... I mean...it doesn’t matter. I could go to a hundred meetings and it won’t help.”

“CATHERINE!”

Catherine’s eyes welled up and she looked down. “Ooohhh!” she screeched as she covered her mouth with both hands. She was openly sobbing now as she leaned up against the wall near the side door. Eugene was frightened as he stared at his wife.

Catherine lifted her head and took her hands from her mouth. “A drink is the only thing that eases the pain.”



Eugene was driving to another assignment on the south side of Old Chicago, but he couldn’t help but reflect on that terrible morning. *What’s going on? What does she know about Dennis and Teresa? Why does she hate them? Why won’t she tell me?* As he headed south on Western Avenue

he heard whistles shrilling and saw the Lightning Squad in his rear view mirror. He checked his speed. *Five miles over the limit. They can't flag me for that. Can they? Maybe it's Dennis.* They caught up and motioned to him to pull over. He figured it must be Dennis, but when he waited, he didn't see his friend. A guy he didn't know approached him. *Christ. Just five over the limit, but how could I be so stupid. I let Catherine's histrionics break my concentration.* As the squad leader approach he reflected on his ugly face, and then as he got closer, *Christ! He's got no face.*

"Driver's license, please."

Eugene complied.

"You Eugene Sulke?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were speeding. Get out of the car, Mr. Sulke."

Oh, where is Dennis? Eugene got out of the car. "Did you pull me over for speeding or because my name is Sulke?"

The angered squad leader hit him in the mouth with his rifle butt, and Gene staggered trying to stay on his feet. "Don't get smart with me. Get back in your car and follow us. You do anything funny, and we'll shoot your tires out."

He did what he was told and they led him several miles to the brigade office. There they led him inside and treated him for a cut to his upper lip. Then they led him into an interrogation room. *Oh, where is Dennis?*

Eugene Sulke was in Battalion Headquarters 127 and held on charges of abusive language to a squad leader and speeding for a third time. When Eugene asked for a lawyer all he got was derision and laughter. Any other questions were ignored. *Where is Dennis?*

They put him in a jail cell. When he got there he was appalled by the condition of it. *This is no jail cell; it's a cage.* There were no bars, just a steel mesh; about four by four. There was no toilet or cot; just a drain to urinate in. If he wanted to sit down, he'd have to do it on a cement floor. The guard told him if he needed to shit they would give him a bucket and six pieces of toilet paper. He would be charged a dollar for tossing out his waste. If he was there all day he'd get one meal every eight hours. It wasn't designed to be delicious or nutritious either. *Oh, where is Dennis?*

Squad Leader O'Reilly showed up two hours later. He forced a smile and then had the cage opened. "Come on, Genie," as Dennis motioned for him to come out. He escorted him outside and then looked at him a little

more seriously. “Really, Gene. You can’t fuck with these guys. I would have gotten you off that speeding ticket. I’m friends with Mad Dog. That’s what we call the Battalion Commander. Doesn’t he look like a mutt?” He was almost laughing now and then got serious again.

“Gene, they wanted to take you to trial. You could lose your job if the judge found you guilty; and he would too. The judge is a Lightning Squad guy. The government allows this. Anyway, don’t worry. I talked Mad Dog out of any charges. That squad leader is a real asshole. He may be looking for you again, so be careful. If they stop you, be polite and they can’t bring you in. The squad leaders get half the fine for speeding or other violations, so you have to be on your guard. Things are getting worse around here. Come on, I’ll walk with you to your car.”



Gene thanked his friend as he got into his car and called his work. He apologized for being late, but lied about what happened, using the excuse that he broke down on the way there. He was fortunate that no one cared he was late, and they told him to come back tomorrow morning. Gene had begun driving home when he suddenly saw a strange woman sitting in his back seat. “What the fuck,” Gene yelled as he slammed on the breaks and pulled over to the side of the road.

She smiled serenely. “Hello, Gene.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Cassandra O’Reilly. I’m Ray O’Reilly’s wife. You remember Ray, right? He’s Dennis’ brother.”

“What are you doing in my car? I mean, why are you here?”

“I’m looking after you.” Cassandra was a tough looking woman with flaming red cropped hair and greenish grey eyes. She was short—only about five feet tall and skinny as a rail, yet she talked like she was someone in authority, though she wore no uniform. She was quite self-assured as she climbed out of the backseat and into the front passenger one. She just looked at Gene and waited for him to say something.

“Why do I suddenly need all these people to look after me? First, Dennis, and now you.”

Cassandra smiled broadly. She wasn't much more than twenty years old; about half Ray's age, and much cuter. Her smile was infectious, and it caught Eugene off guard. He felt angry and attracted to her at the same time. Cassandra instantly picked up on that, and used it to her advantage. "I heard about your run-in with the Squad."

"Are you with the Lightning Squad?"

Cassandra just stared at Eugene. "You're really cute."

"What?"

"You're not a soldier, though."

"I'm a businessman."

"Well, as a businessman, you're rather handsome with your cute little spare tire." She pinched his stomach.

"Cut that out."

Cassandra snickered. "I'm guessing about five-seven."

"I'm five-nine."

"Okay, five-eight. And that cute little face and blonde hair," she laughed again. Eugene looked angry. She expected that reaction, and put on a faux pout. "Everyone knows you. I couldn't wait to meet you. Ray told me about you when you were both just kids."

"Does this have something to do with my father?"

"Not really." Cassandra was charming and bewitching at the same time. She made him feel uncomfortable.

"I used to be in the Lightning Squad when they were good and honest people. That changed when Jaydan Casimir was made the commandant. We used to care about people, and then he made a deal with the RAC."

"Aren't those the...uh...oh, I can't remember what those assholes are called."

Cassandra wriggled her nose and said, "Real Americans for Change; and you're right, they are a bunch of assholes; a bunch of fascists used by the American Party to keep people in line. The Lightning Squad was formed as a counter to them. We were the good guys." Cassandra looked away, frowning. After a moment she continued. "Then we got Jaydan Casimir. He made a deal with the RAC." Cassandra paused. She became serious and then turned back to Gene, looking quizzical.

"Why are you driving a Lexus? Are you nuts?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Boy, you are naïve."

He continued to stare at her.

“As I was saying, the Squad aren’t the nice guys we were supposed to be. The RAC tried to control people while the Squad fought the RAC. We tried to help people; made sure everyone had enough to eat; the homeless got shelter; and to keep the RAC away from the populists—stuff like that. We’d take money from the RAC, who got money from the government. We’d use it to help the people. Then Casimir changed all that. Now we don’t touch the RAC. There’s no money for the people. The Squad changed. Now they rob anyone who looks like they have money and keep it for themselves. Casimir said we needed to operate more like a business.” She wrinkled her nose as she said it.

Cassandra turned away again, with a faraway look, as she stared out the window.

Gene looked pensively at her. After a minute she turned back toward Gene and took a deep breath before continuing. “That’s why Bog pulled you over this morning.”

“Bog? Is that the Squad leader?”

“Yeah, that’s his nickname because he looks like death. He’d pull over anyone for the least infraction; anyone who looks like he has money. If he can clock you one mile over the speed limit he gets half the fine—about a hundred bucks. Do yourself a favor—lose the Lexus.”

“He looked like his face was burned off.”

“Yeah. He pulled over the wrong motorist one time. The guy raced away from him, and Bog pursued him. Then the guy turned around and started right after him; tried to run him over. Bog slammed on his brakes, but it was too late. He smashed into the guy’s car. Bog’s cycle caught fire as he laid there unconscious. The other squad members pulled him away from the cycle, but he was pretty badly burned. He almost died. It changed him.”

“Changed him? How?”

“He was an all right guy. Ray knew him. Then after the accident he changed. Hated the people he once tried to help. He figured that the only one needing help was himself. He hated when people freaked out upon seeing him. He wanted to hurt them. He’d find any reason to ticket them. It became all about the money with him.”

Gene tightened his grip around the steering wheel. “Is that what you’re protecting me from? This guy, Bog?”

“Not Bog! I just told you why he pulled you over.” She looked away briefly and then turned back to Gene. “Dennis!”

“That’s absurd.”

“Look, Mr. Businessman, Dennis isn’t your friend. Okay?”

“What are you talking about? I’ve known him all my life. We were best —”

“Your re-acquaintance with your childhood friend wasn’t a coincidence.”

“I know. He was watching after me because of the squabble concerning my father.”

“He was watching you because he was ordered to. He knows you; knows he can win you over. You may have been childhood friends once, but I tell you, Gene, he doesn’t care about you now. He’s just doing his duty.”

“I had lunch with him at his house. He and his wife are nice people. He just got me out of a Brigade jail. You can’t just waltz into my life and tell me who I can call a friend.”

“They’re not your friends. Dennis is liked by the Commandant, and he knows it. He’s in line for a big promotion, and his wife wants more money.”

“Why should I believe you? I don’t even know you.”

Cassandra tensed up and raised her voice. “Look, Mr. Tycoon. Your neck is half in the sling. When it’s all the way there, it’ll be too late. I won’t be able to save you.”

Gene turned toward her with arms waving and almost shouting, “Why me? What have I done? I work. I mind my own business. Okay, I occasionally speed. I’m sure I’m not the only one. Now, I’m public enemy number One? Are you kidding? What have I done that I need your protection?”

Cassandra was calm. “You know Harold Zinney. He’s public enemy number One. They’re afraid you’ll go to New America. They believe you’ll then be on the inside, working with the hated one on the outside.”

Gene calmed down now. “It isn’t like we’d made plans to what... overthrow the government? Nevertheless, in this paranoid society I get the point.”

“At this point, all they want Dennis to do is keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t go running off to the New World. But there’s one more enemy you have.”

Eugene didn’t understand and continued to stare at his visitor.

“Jaydan Casimir.” Cassandra stopped to gauge Eugene’s reaction. There was none. “He’s...well, I’ll tell you later. Suffice to say—stay away from Dennis.”

“Why did you stop? What about Casimir?”

“You won’t believe me. When you’re ready to hear more we’ll talk again. There’s a Phillips station about three miles down the road. Let me off there.”

“Then what?”

“I’ll let you know.”



It was late when Gene got home, and Catherine wasn’t there. Gene decided to fix himself a drink, go outside, sip his brandy, and reflect on all that happened.

Was Cassandra right? Is Dennis bad? What’s wrong with wanting more money? I saw how he and his wife lived. It makes sense to want a promotion; heck, Dennis even talked about it. And Teresa—she was so nice. They were genuine. I’m sure of it.

Eugene got up to go into the kitchen and make dinner when he suddenly realized something. He hadn’t checked the garage to see if Catherine’s car was there. There was room for only one car in the garage, so he let Catherine use it. He set the drink down and went to the side door that opened into the garage and looked. It was there. *Then, where is she? Is she in the bedroom?*

Gene called his wife, but there was no answer. He went upstairs to the bedroom and found her lying on the bed. He assumed she was sleeping it off, but something didn’t look right. He approached her, half in fear. As he got to her side of the bed she didn’t appear to be breathing, and her skin color was pallid.

Gene grabbed his phone and called 9-1-1. The police and EMS showed up a few minutes later, and they carried Catherine into the ambulance. They tried to resuscitate her but she wasn’t responding. The EMT told him not to lose hope, and they’d bring her to St. Gregory’s. He could follow them, but he was interrupted before he could get into his car.

“Mr. Sulke, I’m detective Ralph Wismar. I’m sorry about your wife, but I can tell you that she’s dead. The EMT can’t confirm that because he isn’t a doctor, but there’s no hurry getting to the hospital. We have to make sure this isn’t a crime scene so I hope you don’t mind if we look around.”

“Yes, I mind,” Eugene said. “I’d like to be with my wife right now.” The police weren’t interested, and they walked right in.

“I have rights! Unreasonable search and seizure.” Wismar ignored him. “Please,” Eugene said, “I need to be with my wife right now.”

Wismar and a couple police officers began looking around. One went to the bedroom and one to the kitchen. Wismar stayed with Eugene. The guy in the kitchen called to Wismar. “I found something, sir. It looks like a suicide note.” The note was sitting on the kitchen table. Wismar, careful not to touch it until he completed his investigation, read the note.

Gene, get away quickly.

The detective turned to Eugene, who also read the note. “Do you know what it means?”

“No.”

“Does she mean get out of the house? Get out of town? Get out of the country?”

“I don’t know.”

Another officer took a picture of the note.

“There’s no sign of a struggle. No sign of robbery. Everything is orderly. It appears to be a suicide, but I want to order an autopsy, if that’s okay with you?”

Jesus, now they want to desecrate her as well, he thought.

“We can get a court order.”

“Fine!” Gene felt the acceptance of defeat.

The police left and Gene went to the hospital, where Catherine was confirmed dead. He signed some papers and returned home to find a house as empty as a forgotten dream. He began pacing the room with an empty mind. He felt like a shell with nothing alive inside. He was aware of the silence; the emptiness. He felt like the roads in his friend’s neighborhood—

dying, becoming less road. He felt the meaninglessness of his own existence; the pointlessness of going on. He wondered if this was what Catherine felt in her desperation to leave this world.

Tears welled up and he reached for his comfortable old recliner and collapsed into it. He couldn't control his emotions any longer. Tears streamed down his cheek, and he felt dead. Catherine was his wife, partner, coach, confidant, and lover. Everything that gave his life meaning revolved around her. Now she was gone, and he couldn't care about anything else anymore.

Night wore on in insufferable certitude. Hour after hour passed with no relief from the pain of his loneliness. He couldn't sleep; couldn't feel tired. He'd pace the house, then sit, and then pace some more—all with no thoughts, plans, or understanding of all that happened. His mind wandered in a journey that had no destination.

As the first rays of light streamed through the living room curtains, Eugene sat back in his chair and began sobbing. *Why couldn't she just come to me? I could've helped her.* Eugene reflected on the other morning; that terrible morning. Catherine wanted to tell Gene something, but couldn't. *Why?* He tried to understand what Cassandra and Catherine told him, but Gene still couldn't put the pieces together. Anger began to replace his thoughts as he stood up again. Once more the tears freely flowed as he began shouting. "CATHERINE! WHY DID YOU DO THIS? I NEED YOU. I CAN'T GO ON WITHOUT YOU. WHY? WHY? WHY?" He collapsed onto the rug near the chair and pounded on the floor. All emotional control was gone now. "Please come back. I need you!"

Eugene sprawled out on the floor, crying, his mind emptying again as he felt the will to go on drift just out of his reach.

CHAPTER 5:

THE FACE OF EVIL

“Wismar here. I’m afraid I have some bad news, sir. Catherine killed herself with a drug overdose.”

“Shit, I knew she would. She thought boozing it up would turn me off; that I’d leave her alone. Shit! All it did was make me angrier.” The man began to smile. “Look, I found someone else—early middle age; nice looking. Found her in jail doing time for extortion.” The man began grinning; his gleaming white teeth shone through the wrinkles around his mouth. “My little sweetie. I’m going to love fucking that cunt.

“I remember that last night with Catherine. I picked her up and she comes over all shit-faced. I just wanted to kill her. Hell, if she didn’t do it herself, I would have. I wanted to do it especially hard. You should have heard her scream, Wismar. Then she started shouting Sulke’s name—‘Gene! Gene!’” he said in falsetto voice. “I just pounded her even harder. She’d scream some more and then began whimpering, ‘please stop,’ and then calling that bastard’s name. I plunged in harder still. I started screaming at her to shut up, but she just kept screaming, and pleading with me to stop. I just laughed and screamed right back at her. I swear to God, Wismar, I wanted to split her in two. She was nothing to me—just a plaything. This new girl is going to be my wife. And I’ll fix it so that no matter what I do to her she’ll love it.” He burst into a broad laughter. “Imagine that, Wismar. No matter what I do she’ll scream for more. She’s going in for treatment right away.”

“Glad to hear it,” Wismar said. “I told you that’s what you should have done with Catherine from the beginning.”

“Treatment is expensive, but I realize that now.”

“You’ll need to treat Sulke as well.”

“Why?”

“He’ll make trouble for you.”

“According to O’Reilly he’s no threat.”

“I don’t know. If he ever finds out you’re behind his wife’s death....”

“I have clean hands. She chose to drink. I’m not responsible.”

“All I know is that women seem to die when you finish with them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Take Anna. I got the police report. Good job. Road rage. Police say she cut some hot head off, and he shot her. Nobody saw anything. It’s under investigation, but I don’t suppose it will go anywhere.”

“You think you know so Goddamn much, Wismar.”

“All right, all right. Look, what do you want me to do with Sulke? If you aren’t going to treat him, I could have him arrested. Murder. He talks, you know—I mean about his marital problems. Everyone knows she drinks. He even told a co-worker he just had a terrible argument with Catherine right before she killed herself. I could make it look like he did it—used the pills and booze to make it look like she committed suicide. There’s a bunch of witnesses I could bring in—you know—establish motive. I could get his prints on the bottles. A sympathetic jury and judge, and bye-bye Mr. Sulke.”

The man listened with interest. “Yeah, that would fix it. See what you can find out.”



The upstairs alarm clock had been ringing when Eugene awoke on the living room floor. His clothes were disheveled and his face was still moist when he slowly climbed to his feet. The alarm buzzed like a swarm of bees as Eugene ascended the stairs to the master bedroom. He stared at the bed from the doorway, almost afraid to enter. The alarm blared away relentlessly, telling him it’s time for work. Work was the farthest thing from Eugene’s mind as he stared at the bed; the alarm still beckoning. He slowly walked in and turned it off, sitting on Catherine’s side of the bed.

No tears christened his cheeks nor moistened his eyes now. He felt dead as he stared into nothing. Then he directed his attention to the nightstand next to him. A lamp, a glass, a book, an empty bottle of gin and a half-empty bottle of pills stood watch over Eugene’s shattered life. He stared at the pills, and after awhile, picked them up and stared at them some more. As he began to unscrew the cap, the downstairs phone rang. Eugene

stopped and turned toward the door. He put the bottle down, slowly got up and then descended the stairs, making his way toward the kitchen. He stared at the phone until it stopped ringing. He turned around and started for the stairs again only to stop when his pocket phone rang.

“Son,” his mother said, “I just heard what happened. Oh, you poor boy. The hospital called and said she’d killed herself.”

Eugene listened, but said little.

“Come over, son. I’ll make you some breakfast and coffee. Are you going to work?”

“Uh, no, mom; I guess not. I hadn’t thought of it.” Eugene’s voice was cracked and rough.

“I’ll make you some bacon and eggs, and brew some coffee.”

“That’s okay, mom. I’m just going to stay home today. I have to make funeral arrangements, anyway.”

Eugene’s voice gave him away. She was worried. She didn’t like the sound of it. “I want you to come over right now. You shouldn’t be alone. I’ll make the funeral arrangements. I’ll let your father know.”

“No, mom. I’ll be all right.”

“Eugene, I insist. This is your mother talking to you. You come over right now. I’m starting breakfast this minute and if you aren’t here in fifteen minutes I’ll call a cab and come right over.”

“All right, mom. Give me about a half hour.”



“Sit down, Eugene. I have your breakfast right here. When did you last eat?”

“I don’t know.”

“Eugene, you look terrible. Stay here today, okay?”

He forced a smile as he picked at his food. She poured a cup of coffee and set it down. “Tell me everything. What was going on with her?”

It was painful to discuss it with his mother, but he knew he had no other choice. He told her about Dennis and the Lightning Squad; her dramatics when he invited him over; about her drinking; and her disappearances.

“This doesn’t sound like her at all. Do you think this has something to do with the Lightning Squad?”

“I don’t know. Really, mom. I’ll be all right. I’ll make the funeral arrangements and go back to work right afterwards.”

She was worried, but nothing she said could convince him to stay.



Eugene returned home only briefly to shower and dress, and then he went out. He let Stuart Everson know what happened and took some time off. He found a funeral home, picked out a casket and burial plot, and then he went to the shopping district in the town square.

The streets of the square were closed to traffic, so Gene got out to walk. The place was crowded with hucksters, whores, zombies, and hundreds of partygoers. There were bars on every block. Tattoo parlors and adult bookstores dotted the square where neon signs lit everything up. Crowds of people would congregate outside the seedy dens. The smell of pot punctuated the air. Fights were common, and yelling and laughter were everywhere. Head shops added to the gaudiness, and in the center of it all was Shorty’s; the town casino.

Eugene remembered when it was a boarded up community center. His father used to go there, but lack of interest forced it to close until the town sold it to Shorty McDougel, who opened up a gym. He couldn’t make a go of it until five years ago when Stu Everson talked him into gambling. At first he put some slot machines in the gym, and then began taking some of the exercise equipment out to add a roulette and card table. Finally, he decided to convert the whole place into a casino. Mark Packable then convinced him to open up some private rooms for sex; and with sex, to add a headshop and sell drugs. Eugene doctored the books for him.

“Hi, sweetie,” a hooker shouted to Eugene, as he passed by. “Need a date?”

“Let me keep you company tonight. I’m very lucky,” another said.

“Hey buddy, need some weed? How about some acid? Got everything man. Come on in.” Eugene hurried past them.

Passing the tawdriness, the shrillness of the signage, and the seemliness of the whole atmosphere, he reached the L&S supermarket at the south end of town, where he picked up some bread and lunchmeat. Then, one more pass through the garishness.



When he arrived home he sat in his favorite chair, sipped a glass of wine, and played some music. After awhile he went to the kitchen to fix a sandwich and have a glass of beer, but the sandwich had no taste and the beer seemed flat. He felt hungry, and yet he had no appetite. He put television on, but it could not fill the emptiness within him. He tried to think about why she did it. *Could I have stopped it? Why did she say I have to get out instead of we have to get out? What did this have to do with Dennis? So much uncertainty.*

Several hours went by with Eugene searching his mind for the answers to his questions. Exhaustion overwhelmed him, but he didn't want to go upstairs. He dreaded the moment when he'd go to where Catherine murdered herself, and so he poured himself a shot of Jack Daniels. He downed several more, and began pacing through the house; his emotions overcoming fatigue. After a few more shots he became angry. "DAMN IT, CATHERINE! WHY? WHY DID YOU DO IT?" He began sniveling as he paced the kitchen. "This isn't fair. We had a great life together. Why did you ruin it? DAMN IT! WHY?" His voice got louder and harsher with each question. He was in a blind rage when he hurled the glass toward the far wall, crashing and splintering it. He collapsed to the floor next to the kitchen table and began sobbing again. He was on his knees with his face arched toward the ceiling. "I HATE YOU! YOU HEAR ME, CATHERINE! YOU TOOK AWAY EVERYTHING FROM ME. I HATE YOU!" His sobbing came in wild pulsations until he let out one last horrible scream; a scream from the top of his voice that could rattle the dead. Finally, he sprawled out on the kitchen floor until sleep overtook him.



When he woke up, shameful and thanking God no one knew of his outburst, he got up and climbed the dreadful stairs. He walked over to his wife's side of the bed and pulled back the covers, and climbed in. He lay down in her space. He could still feel her; still felt her warmth. He stared at the

nightstand once again and picked up the book. It had a tissue she used as a bookmark near the end. He opened it up and read...*save them from the impending destruction*. He closed the book and looked at the spine. Gibbon—the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.



Eugene woke up to the fierce rays of a rising sun. He walked downstairs, his head aching. He was making a pot of extra strong coffee when the phone rang.

“Mr. Sulke. This is the county coroner. I just got the results of the autopsy. Could you come in, please?”

“Could you tell me now? Was it alcohol?”

“A mixture of alcohol and barbiturates, but there’s something else you should know.”

“What is it?”

“I’d rather you come down to the County Morgue.”

“Why can’t you tell me now?”

“It is at the request of Detective Wismar that you come down.”

“All right. I’ll be there in an hour.”



“Eugene, let’s talk over here,” Wismar said. Gene sat down across from him, watching him shuffle some papers around. “Ah, yes, here it is. Did you know your wife was pregnant? About...let’s see...three months.”

“What?” Eugene said incredulously. That’s impossible!”

Wismar just stared at Eugene with a blank expression. “I use a rubber because we don’t want children.”

“How were you two getting along? Has she been drinking?”

“Yes, but only the last couple months or so.”

“Has she talked to you about anything wrong in her life?”

“No, we haven’t been talking much lately. We got along great until she started drinking. Then she began withdrawing. In fact, I’d say she started

withdrawing several months ago. We made love sparingly during that time.”

“Did you know she was expecting?”

“No. She never mentioned it to me, and I don’t know how she could be pregnant. I use protection.”

Wismar just smiled and stared at Eugene before firing the next question. “Did you argue with her over her drinking?”

“Are you insinuating something?”

“How do you think she got pregnant, Mr. Sulke? You knew she was screwing someone, right?” Eugene didn’t answer but wore a pained expression.

“She couldn’t get an abortion and couldn’t face you once she found out she was cheating on you.” Wismar paused to stare at the red-faced man across the table. “I asked you before if you knew why your wife died.”

“She committed suicide. You saw the note.”

“Did you write it?”

“What?” Wismar was unmoved. “No, I didn’t write it.”

“One of your co-workers told me you’d like to kill your wife.”

“I never said or felt anything of the sort.”

“You kill her?”

“Is this a question or an accusation?”

Wismar coldly stared at Eugene.

“May I go now?”

Wismar continued to stare at him, but he knew he had no evidence to hold him. “Go on, get out.”

Eugene got up to leave when Wismar got one final dig in. “I will continue my investigation, Mr. Sulke. Be in touch soon, I’m sure.”



Gene went back to work in late September, after the funeral, surprising Stu Everson with his return. Eugene realized he needed to keep busy. He put on appearances and even cracked a few jokes, but he was hurting inside.

Stu Everson poked his head into Eugene’s office and asked how it was going. Gene smiled, but it wasn’t a warm smile; it was forced.

“I just wanted you to know how deeply sorry I am about you and Catherine. She was a wonderful lady. Any idea why she did it? I mean, I’ll

understand if you don't want to talk about it."

"It's okay, Stu, but I really don't know why; although I think it had something to do with the Lightning Squad." Eugene looked down and pursed his lips, while Stu stared at him.

"There's a Detective Wismar who I think wants to build a case against me. I don't know why. Killing Catherine is the last thing I'd want to do."

Stu frowned and looked concerned. "Did you say Wismar?"

"Yeah. Have you heard of him?"

Stu just nodded up and down. "He works for the Lightning Squad. Eugene, I have an attorney that works for some friendly people in government. I think he can slow that bastard down." Eugene brightened up as Stu left.

Eugene Sulke was Project Manager in charge of Business Dynamics. In his position he would cook the books to make it look like the products or services provided were more profitable than they were. He worked with Mark Packable, the company's marketing guru. They often worked in tandem: Mark would move the owner to drugs, gambling and prostitution, while Eugene would massage the books. The government legalized the "sin industry" years ago, and government regulation of accounting practices was almost nonexistent.

Gene was given a small but comfortable office next to the Vice President for Business Optimization. Raul Rodriguez was Eugene's immediate boss and the number two man in the organization. Raul would get the clients, determine the scope of the job, and assign it to one of his four project managers. Each one was an expert in a particular area of business. These areas included marketing, inventory control, organizational development, and business dynamics.

Gene enjoyed his job. He enjoyed the challenge of solving seemingly insurmountable problems. He was a minimalist with few books on a built-in bookcase; a small credenza in one corner with a coffee urn and a few incidentals; and his fairly small desk had just a phone, laptop, and a double image desktop frame picture on it.

Eugene was sitting at his desk, mulling over some problem in his mind, when he picked up the frame and looked at the pictures. On one side was a picture of Catherine looking so young and beautiful, and on the other side, the two of them were in a silly pose. He found himself feeling overwhelmed with grief again, but he couldn't put the frame down. He stared at

Catherine's portrait and felt anger welling up within. *Why couldn't you tell me what was wrong? Why?* Then he stopped and forced himself to put the picture down. He stared at it some more, his eyes getting redder. *Stop it!* He grabbed the pictures again putting the frame in the bottom drawer. *Self-indulgence*, he thought. *Get back to work.* He finished the day working on a spreadsheet and had begun scheduling appointments for tomorrow when Stu came in.

"Gene, I talked to our attorney. You won't have to worry about that detective. He threw a real scare into him."

Eugene smiled. "Thank you, Stu. You've been a real friend to me; to us."

"Gene, I need you on something else. It's time you moved forward. Raul is leaving us to start his own business. I want you to be my new number two. I need someone who I can trust and who's smart. You'll be my Vice President."

"Raul—leaving?"

"It happens. Gene, Raul was the catalyst of our business operations. This is what you know; what you do. You're the perfect man for the job. I swear to God, Gene, people will forego food to get their drug fix. Others will gamble away any extra money they save, and men will spend their hard earned money on whores, booze, and drugs. I got into this business, Gene, not to help businesses find a way to endure a shrinking market, but to find new ways to make money. I know it isn't nice, and gee, I wish we could make money the old fashioned way, but those days are gone, Gene. You know this is our future."

Gene's smile began fading with a look of concern. Stu picked up on it. "Gene, I need you to play a leadership role on this. The job pays a quarter of a million dollars a year, two months paid vacation, a new car, and other perks."

"I suppose a person would be crazy to refuse, yet I have some concerns."

Stu frowned. "Eugene, this is what you've worked for. You earned this promotion. Give it some thought. Oh, and one more thing. The job comes with a home in the Fortress. Are you interested? You don't have to make a decision right now, but I do need one soon. Raul will be leaving at the end of October, and I need a replacement. Take the rest of the week to think about it."

“Okay, Stu.”



As Eugene headed home Cassandra popped up from his back seat again. “Hi, Gene,” she said with a wide smile on her face.

“Why can’t you give me some warning?”

Cassandra climbed out of the back and jumped into the front seat.

“I’m sort of glad you’re here,” he said. “I suppose you know what happened to my wife. You seem to know everything that’s going on. So suppose you tell me.”

She just looked at Gene with a sad smile. “I’m sorry about your wife. I didn’t know her, but I do know a bit about what was going on.”

He stared at her in anticipation.

“I started to tell you the last time I was here, but I knew you weren’t ready to hear this part yet. Your wife was fooling around with Commandant Jaydan Casimir.”

“The police told me she was pregnant.” He stopped to stare at Cassandra who looked blankly back at Eugene. “Now, you’re telling me she was fucking the Commandant of the Lightning Squad?”

“She was coerced into it. It wasn’t her choice. Anyway, they started a relationship several months ago; about the time she started getting moody.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean coerced? And what does all this have to do with Dennis? You and Catherine hate him.”

“Dennis works for Jaydan Casimir. Jay found out that you and Dennis were best friends as kids. He likes Dennis; thinks he’s got potential. Now, Dennis gets a nice bonus for information about you. Dennis has a big mouth. He brags about his new assignment, and how he’s going to milk information out of you. If that information results in confirmation that you’re an enemy of the state, he gets an even bigger bonus.”

“I don’t believe you. Dennis wouldn’t do that. I met him and his wife just recently. We’ve talked on the phone. They came to the funeral. They’re wonderful people. I don’t know what problem you and Ray have with them, but I think I’m a pretty good judge of people and you are way off base. How do you know so much anyway?”

“Look, Mr. Businessman, put it together. Dennis works for Jay now. Jay told him about you and Catherine. Dennis talks. When he talks, I know.”

“But you told me you weren’t in the Lightning Squad anymore. How would you know who Dennis talks to or what he even talks about?”

“It’s true, I’m not with those bastards anymore, but we have spies in their headquarters. Anyway, they started this relationship several months ago. The word is that Jay saw your wife in some photos that the Squad took of her.”

“Photos?”

“They have a whole dossier on you. We covered the reasons why the last time.”

Gene said nothing, but indicated he cared to hear more.

“Anyway, he was attracted to her. He had you watched for a while. He got to know your schedule and he tracked you.”

“Tracked me? Like with Dennis?”

“He had a GPS tracker put on your car. He knows your whereabouts all the time. He knows every place you go. Anyway, one day Jay goes to your house and Catherine opens the door. He pretends to be a co-worker—someone you’ve mentioned. Mark, I believe.” She paused.

“Go on.”

“Anyway, once in, he then revealed himself and propositioned your wife.” She paused to check Gene’s reaction, and then she got a little more serious. “He asked her out for a drink. She refused, of course. Then Casimir told her if she didn’t go with him he’d have your father put under his custody. He assured her he knew every place he goes, and because the RAC has an agreement with the Squad, he could pick him up any time.”

“He had my father tracked too?”

“I don’t actually know, but he could have. Your wife protested and threatened to call the police. Casimir calmly informed her he was the police. He was out of his jurisdiction, of course, but the threat was real. He convinced Catherine he really could get your father, but if she would agree to go out with him he’d leave your father alone. So she agreed.”

“Why didn’t she just come to me?”

She just smiled. “What would you have done?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you do. You would have gone to the police. You’d have filed a report, but then your father would be in Squad hands. Furthermore, you’d

be the one in trouble. You couldn't do anything about it, Gene. Your wife knew that. She hoped that having a drink with the son of a bitch would be the end of it." She paused. "But it wasn't. He began asking for sexual favors. Catherine resisted." She stopped and looked seriously at Eugene. "Then the Commandant began using you."

Eugene's face turned red and he looked like an eruption about to happen.

"Casimir was told to keep tabs on you, but Casimir saw an opportunity—get rid of you and take Catherine. He hoped you'd try and do something about it. Then he'd have a reason to arrest you, and he would still have Catherine with more leverage. She knew how powerful that man is. She knew you could get into serious difficulties if you knew." Cassandra looked away, frowning. "So she agreed." She turned toward Gene.

"So he raped her," he said, more to himself. His eyes narrowed and his breathing quickened, but he fought back the urge to explode.

"Yes," Cassandra said. They were both reticent at this point, and then Gene slammed the steering wheel with his hands, still fighting against the anger. Cassandra just looked at him and then continued. "By this time your wife was drinking heavily. It was her way of dealing with her inner turmoil. She was given a choice—cheat on you or watch you killed or imprisoned. It was no choice at all."

Gene turned suddenly toward Cassandra. "You're telling me this man, Casimir, saw a picture of my wife and fucked her; ruining both our lives. And you think I need protection?" Then, Eugene looked down for a second and then back at Cassandra, nonplussed.

"What?" Cassandra said.

"Is this what this is all about?"

"What?"

"Why you're here. You knew I'd want him dead. You told me all this because you want money to kill him. Okay, fine. How much do you want?"

"I don't want anything, Gene. That isn't why I'm here. I told you, I'm here to protect you."

"Since Catherine is dead, why would Casimir care about me now? I don't see that I need your protection. Maybe it's Casimir who needs protection. I won't rest until that bastard is dead. No, not just dead. I want to see his gonads stuffed down his throat first."

“Please, Gene. I know how you feel, but you could never get to Casimir. He’d have you killed before you even found out where he lives. No one can get to him. He’d be dead already if I could get to him. But you are in danger, Gene. You must believe me.”

“I’m not some revolutionary. I’m not going to sneak off to the New World and try to start a war. Why should I need any protection? One day I’ll find someone who can get to him. I tell you, he is the only one who needs protection. I have money, and soon I’ll have a lot more. I’ll pay that bastard back. In the meantime, all I have to do is mind my own business and everything will be fine.”

“Everything won’t be fine, Gene. It isn’t just about Casimir trying to steal your wife. Dennis wants a promotion, and his wife wants more money. If Dennis can turn you into some anti-American militant he gets a bigger bonus. That’s precisely what he’s going to try to do. I’ll know what he’s up to because—”

“I know. Dennis talks.”

“Exactly! You need me, Gene. I know how much you hate Jaydan Casimir, but planning something or looking for him only plays right into his hands. Be careful, and don’t talk to Dennis. You may let me out here.”



A few minutes after Gene drove off, Ray arrived and picked up his wife. “You hear everything?” she asked.

“Yeah. Cass, that detective wants to charge Gene with murder.”

“Will he?”

“I doubt he has enough evidence. A middle class guy, well respected, is not easy to convict. If he can’t, then he may try to use Dennis to stir Eugene up.”

“If Dennis finds out I’ve been talking to him...”

“That would be bad for Eugene. If Casimir gets wind of you meeting him he might start thinking he really is dangerous—first, the secret meetings with Zinney, and now secret meetings with you. He’s going to get even more suspicious.”

“What should we do?”

“Cass, I know you don’t like using Eugene, but we must. I don’t like it either, but we can take advantage of this situation. You need to keep Gene mad and angry. We need to bring the Squad back to its original purpose, destroy NOGOV, and merge with New America. They showed us the way. Zinney and Eugene can be the vanguard for the revolution. We’ll be the spark. Look at this world we live in. NOGOV has killed it off. NOGOV has got to go, and Eugene and Zinney are the keys to making that happen.”

“I know, Ray,” Cassandra said. “Then why am I telling the guy to stay away from Dennis and out of Squad territory?”

“First off, he won’t listen to you, and second, we need him to know we’re on his side. We need him, and he needs to know that he needs us. We need him in the New World working with Zinney in the old world. They’d be the leaders and we can overthrow this moldy old regime.”

“How are we ever going to get Gene to agree to that? He’s not a revolutionary. Hell, the only thing he wants to do is play Mr. Businessman. He doesn’t give a shit about politics.”

“But Zinney does.”

“I’m sorry for being a pessimist, honey, but he’s never even going to go over to New America. He may very well break off relations with Zinney as well. I tried to get his cell number so I could call him instead of hiding on the floor, but he told me he didn’t want to see me anymore. The only thing he wants to do now is kill Jaydan because of what he did to his wife.”

“Revolutions often start over some personal grudge. I tell you, Cass, we can use his hatred to our advantage.”

Cassandra frowned. “But it isn’t political with him; it’s personal. He doesn’t see Casimir beyond someone who raped his wife. He doesn’t see how it’s more than just Catherine.”

“You’re impatient, Cass. It’s up to us to help Eugene understand that his wife is only a fatality in a whole chain of events that have killed this country off. Face it, honey, the United States of America is dead, and Eugene will be too if he doesn’t get out of here.”

CHAPTER 6:

MURDER

Several months had passed since Eugene last saw Cassandra. Raul's new business wouldn't be ready until spring, so Gene had more time to think about it. This meant, however, that Eugene would have to travel in Squad territory. He would check his backseat, check his speed, and maintain his car before setting out. Stu tried to keep him out of paramilitary territory, and Gene was grateful for that. When he couldn't, he assured him that his lawyer would come to his rescue if he got into any trouble.

Gene headed out to Landry's Tool and Die Company. He planned to interview their Chief Operating Officer, Jim Wyatt; his Chief Financial Officer, Andy Paratino; and the company CEO, Marvin Landry. He wanted to assess their situation. Afterwards, he would drive to the Bestard Company to investigate some irregularities.

He tried thinking about the questions he would have for the executives, but his mind continued to wander. He kept reflecting on Catherine, the way she was before the Squad entered her life. He thought about Dennis. He still couldn't make up his mind about him. He thought about Dennis and Ray when they were just kids. Dennis was the older and the taller of the two, but Ray was the stronger: powerfully built with a barrel-chest, massive deltoids, and large shoulders. Dennis was more angular and thinner with a prognathous visage. They were both charismatic figures. Eugene remembered not liking them at first. He felt a bit intimidated by them. It was they who initiated contact with him. With the force of their personalities they became close childhood friends with the shyer Eugene, but when his friends moved to the south side of Old Chicago, they parted ways. They remained in contact the first year, but he never saw them afterwards until their paths crossed again. *Could I still know them?* He was now less sure about Dennis than he was before, but the pleasant memories of him obscured his thought.

There was Cassandra. Was she a nuisance or a protector? Part of him didn't want to see her pop up from his backseat again, but she seemed to have information that was useful to him. She unsettled him; still, she and Catherine had something in common—they both hated the thought of him seeing Dennis.

Finally, there was the offer. This one really unsettled him. Stu was right. This is what he worked for; what he always wanted. Now that it was in his grasp he wasn't sure he still wanted it. *Why shouldn't I want it? It's sort of what I'm doing now, only I'll be the guy directing the operation. What's wrong with that?* Still, he was uneasy about it. *Am I about to turn into Faust?*



“Cass! He’s in Kankakee,” Ray said.

“How long?”

“Since about 10:30. No telling how long he’ll be there, but this is our first shot at setting up a showdown with the Squad. It could get dangerous. Are you up for it?”

“I’m ready,” she said.

“All right, but things are going to be a lot more difficult than they were. I just got word from our contact that Gene’s company just hired a lawyer with government ties. They warned Jay against bringing Eugene in. He’d have to do something serious before he could be arrested.”

“What’s the point in getting him arrested? I mean, wouldn’t that just make Gene even more reluctant to listen to us?”

“That is a risk, Cass, but I’m betting he would be angrier at the Squad for arresting him. Look, Cass, it’s part of the process. We have to get him to see that this country is no good anymore.”

“Excess speed and reckless driving. Would that get him arrested?”

“Maybe,” Ray said.

“I’ll call Bog. He doesn’t hold a grudge against me. He wouldn’t hesitate to bring him in.”

“How are you going to get him to drive like a maniac, goose him?”

Cassandra just laughed. “Nah, too dangerous. I want him to speed, not wreck the car. I’ll just...you know, press his buttons like I always do,” she

said.

“I suppose it’s worth a try. If he gets arrested his lawyer should be able to get him out. He’ll be angry at the Squad. Hopefully, he’ll see we’re on his side.”



Cassandra reached Gene’s car about an hour and a half later. She had her own key to his car, courtesy of Ray, who had a friend make a copy for him, and waited for Gene on the floor of the back seat. She arranged for Bog to follow them. Bog said he’d pull Gene over if he drove more than ten miles over the legal limit, and issue him a ticket. He’d only arrest him if his driving was also erratic.

Cassandra was in there for about two hours before Gene came back. He didn’t look on the floor of the back seat, which slim Cassandra easily fit. After Gene cleared the parking lot and drove onto the street, out she popped.

“Shit!” Gene shouted, but there was no slamming the breaks or swerving over. “This is really getting old, Cassandra. I don’t need protection.” Cassandra just smiled at him and put her arms up on the seat cushion. She started playing with his hair. “Cut that out, Cassandra. I’m trying to drive.”

“What’s wrong, Genie Penie? Don’t you like it when I twirl your hair?” Gene said nothing. “Come on, Gene. Pull over. Let me in front.”

“If I stop and pull over it will be to let you out.”

“Ah, Gene. Don’t be that way.” Cassandra carefully kept an eye on the speedometer. The hotter Gene got, the faster he drove. He was now about three miles per hour over the speed limit.

Eugene was furious at his uninvited guest. He needed to think, and didn’t want this woman’s help. “What do you want now, Cassandra? You wanna warn me we’re in your old territory? That I ought to get rid of my Lexus? Buy an old junk heap and quit my job because my work takes me to too many of the wrong places? Something else? Tell me. Then get out.”

“Yeah, all of those things. Oh, and you forgot about me forbidding you to speak to Dennis again.” He was now six miles over.

“At least get rid of the Lexus, Mr. Big Shot Businessman.” Seven miles over.

“Now, as to what I really want to tell you. It’s about your wife’s suicide.” Eight miles over.

“You want to know why she really killed herself, Gene? It wasn’t because she got pregnant. She could have said, ‘You’re going to be a father.’ But that wasn’t the reason. The truth is she enjoyed fucking Jay Casimir. She felt guilty that he was better than you.”

Gene could see her evil smile as she said it. Instantly, he slammed on the brakes, pulled over, and screamed at her. “Get out, you filthy whore! And if you ever break into my car again I will call the police immediately and have you arrested. You understand that, Mrs. O’Reilly? GET OUT!”

As soon as Eugene finished his rant he heard the whistles of the Lightning Squad. “SHIT!” He was stuck. *That damn Cassandra. She probably planned this.* Gene waited for the squad leader to get to him. He hoped that company lawyer could get him out quickly. As the squad leader neared him he recognized him as the same one who pulled him over before.

Eugene turned around when he saw who it was. “Is that booger...or what—?”

Cassandra wasn’t there. He had turned to look in the back seat when Bog knocked on the window. Gene opened it.

“Looking for a gun or something, Mr. Sulke?”

“No. I...was just frustrated.”

“I clocked you at twelve miles over the legal limit.”

Bog looked mean and started speaking in a low and grumbling voice. “You beat the rap the last time and cost me money. Your luck just ran out. Get out of the car!”

He started to get out when he heard the loud popping of weapon fire. Bog turned around to see his rear pointman dead, and in an instant Bog had a funny look on his face as he collapsed to the ground. An astounded Eugene Sulke looked at Cassandra with a squad pointman at her feet, bleeding profusely. All three squad members were dead. The one by Cassandra had his throat slit.

“Jesus Christ!” Eugene said. “Why the hell did you do that? You didn’t have to do that.”

“Get in the car. Now!” Eugene did so, but he was confused.

“But why did you have to kill those men? They didn’t see you. You could have gotten away. I would have been fined; maybe do a little jail time, and that would be the end of it. Now, thanks to your Le Femme Nikita antics, I’m a murder suspect. Jesus, you were no ordinary squad member.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t. I was in the Blue Squad. It’s an elite unit, like the Green Berets,” she said.

“I’m going to be charged with murder or a co-conspiracy to murder.”

“I did what I had to do. We need to get out of Squad territory before those guys are discovered.”

Eugene wasn’t sure what to do. He drove on for about a mile and then pulled over.

“What are you doing?” Cassandra demanded. “We have to get out of here.” She started to take out her phone, but Eugene remained by the side of the road. Cassandra stopped and stared at him. “Eugene, please drive.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “How will they know it’s us that did it?”

“The tracker Dennis put on your car. The Squad’s going to know we were here.”

“You haven’t answered my question yet.”

“What?”

“Why did you have to kill those men? And don’t tell me you had to do it. You didn’t!”

“You’d be screwed if they brought you in. Maybe they’d let you out, but you’d be screwed either way. They know you met me by now. That makes you a suspect right then and there. Now they have this to pin on you. Drive to your parents’ house.”

“NO!” Eugene was fighting to control his anger, but he was developing a genuine hatred for this woman.

“DRIVE!”

“NO!”

“Gene, please!”

“GET OUT!” Eugene had lost control now, and was screaming at Cassandra. “I don’t need your protection. Get out! My life was fine until you, the Lightning Squad, and that Casimir punk entered it. I’m sick of it; sick of you; and sick of all these games. I want you out of my life right now.”

Cassandra found herself on the defensive. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going back to work. I’ll see the company lawyer. I’ll tell my boss everything. I’m innocent here and I’m sick of being used by you and everyone else. NOW GO!”

Cassandra climbed out of the car and watched the Lexus speed away. She reached for her phone and dialed. “Ray, I’ve got a problem.”



Cassandra walked over to her husband’s car and got in. Ray stared blankly ahead and then began driving. “What are we going to do?”

“I have to think.”

“You’re mad at me.”

“Cass, you just don’t think things through. We had a plan, remember?”

“Ray, I know I screwed up, but your plan had no chance of succeeding.”

“You seemed fine with it when we talked about it.”

“You wouldn’t have let me do it if you knew what I was thinking.”

“You’re damn right, I wouldn’t,” Ray said, regretting his harsh tone.

“I saw an opportunity and I took it. That forward pointman was standing right in front of Eugene’s car. The car shielded him from view. I ducked out before Bog got to the car. When I saw where that pointman positioned himself, I just grabbed him around the head and slit his throat without either one of them seeing me. Then I shot both of them.”

Cassandra just stared forward, and then turned toward Ray. “Would it be so bad if he gets arrested? That was the original plan anyway, right?”

“NO! This is serious. Reckless driving is one thing; murder is quite another.”

“I was sure that company lawyer would have gotten Eugene out of a speeding ticket, and he would probably be even more reluctant to listen to us.”

“Everything is changed now.” Ray looked serious as he glanced at his wife. “We’re in trouble. They’ll pick Gene up; scare him with threats of trying him for murder, but they’ll know it was us. They’ll put a big scare in him and then promise to release him with no charges if he fingers us. He will. He hates us.”

“But that’s what I said before. Why get him arrested if he’ll hate us?”

“He sees us as terrorists now, and we’re involving him in our scheme. We needed him to think it’s Casimir and NOGOV who are his enemies; now he just sees us.”

Ray paused and Cassandra pouted. “It’s a process,” he said. “You’re impatient, Cass. It’s just one step among many. With the plan you and I agreed to, the Squad wouldn’t be after us. Things would be simpler. We could help Eugene understand that this government has taken away our freedoms. There’s no regular law enforcement organized by the state or country. Now it’s controlled by unelected people answering to a government seized by corporate interests that have only their own interests to look out for. It’s part of the real education of Eugene Sulke. He was always taught the way the country is supposed to work. He isn’t political yet. To Eugene, the antics of these corporatists and their pundits is entertaining, or, in the case of his wife, tragic. He still hasn’t made the link that all this will, and is, affecting him. He still sees himself as outside the nonsense. Everything we do must be designed to help him see the truth. Now, everything has changed.”

Cassandra was visibly stressed as she turned back toward her husband. “You’re right, Ray. I really screwed up. What are we going to do now?”

“I gotta think.”

Cassandra knew to give him time, though she threw a few sideway glances at him from time to time.

“We have to assume they’re looking for us,” he said. “At the murder scene, did you remember to clean up the empty shells?”

“No. I’m sorry, Ray. I wanted to get out of there fast.”

“Cassie, you just don’t use your head. You did everything wrong. With their tracker on, they have Gene at the scene of the murders, they have shells from your gun—a Berretta nine. They stopped selling them to the general public years ago. Blues are the only ones that have them. They’ll compile a list of suspects, throw out most of them, and you know who that’ll leave?”

Cassandra’s face turned red as she began to frown.

Ray drove on in silence for a while and then took a deep breath. “Poor little Jimmy,” he said, more to himself.

“What?”

“I always hated that name—Bog. You never knew him before he changed. I did. He was one of the good guys. I’ve known him since he was

six years old. He's the son of James Ruggiano—Big Jim. I used to play catch with him in the back yard after the last baseball field was converted to a parking lot. He was a good kid; a really good kid. I got him into the Squad before Casimir destroyed it. I always believed he'd be a Blue someday. Then Big Jim got killed in a shootout with the RAC. It didn't change Jimmy, though. He was still a good guy until that day when that asshole driver tried to kill him. I don't know; maybe it was a combination of being burned and his father killed that...."

"Oh Ray, I didn't really know all that. I know you told me he used to be an all right guy, but I didn't know you had such a relationship with him."

"I remember being in that burn unit at the hospital. He was pretty bitter; didn't want to talk much. He went back to work only six months later. Everyone applauded when he climbed back on a chopper. He was a real hero in my book. But the people...." Ray just quieted.

"What about the people?"

"That's when they started calling him 'death' and 'bog'. They'd make fun of him. Even people that he knew laughed when some jerk called him that name."

Tears moistened Cassandra's cheeks as she blushed.

"It's the country, Cass; this dead world we live in. It changes everybody. Jimmy changed and became mean. Eugene is changing too. That boss he works for was backed by a NOGOV member—some billionaire. He pressured Congress to pass a law legalizing drugs, prostitution, and gambling; then financed the guy to start his business. That business is setting up these operations for his clients. Corruption is everywhere, Cass. Humanity is the biggest casualty. That's why it's so important that we take every advantage we can to overthrow this whole rotted thing."

"I know. Where are we going now?"

"Sean's house."

"Not Sean," she said almost laughing.

"He's kind of on the wild side but he's a good guy. No one but me knows where he lives."

"We're going to need our stuff. Why can't we just pull into a motel?"

"Are you kidding? Even though Casimir doesn't know anything about running an army he has enough experienced people to know to send scouts to every motel, hotel, B&B, hostel, or inn in a hundred mile radius. No, Sean's the safest place for us. The Squad doesn't know where he lives."

“Do you think he can get our stuff for us?”

“If I know Sean, he’ll insist on it.”

“Won’t the squad follow him?”

“We’ll have to assume so but Sean knows how to get away.”

“What if they catch Gene, and he goes to a Squad jail; and that lawyer can’t get him out?”

Ray glanced over to her with a matter-of-fact expression on his face.
“He’ll be executed.”

CHAPTER 7:

PRISON

“Well, well. If it isn’t Mr. Sulke,” the assistant warden said. “Stay behind the line.” Eugene stopped. Another officer ordered him to empty his pockets and dump the contents in a large manila envelope.

“Take off your clothes—all of them,” the assistant warden said.

Eugene was incredulous. “What?”

“Take your clothes off.” Gene did as he was told, but he was given no prison garb to put on. The interrogation began.

“You were tracked to a triple murder scene. Did you kill three Squad soldiers?”

“No.”

“Do you deny being there?”

“No.”

“So you admit you were there?”

“Yes, but I didn’t do anything.”

“Who did?”

Gene was silent.

“Who did?” the AW said a little louder. Again, Eugene didn’t answer. He nodded to one of the officers, who caned his buttocks. Gene yelped and leaped forward.

“Stay behind the line,” barked the AW. He then repeated the question, but Gene remained silent. Time after time the AW asked the same question, and time after time Eugene remained silent, taking a caning each time.

The interrogation went on for an hour. Eugene refused to answer and was continually caned. Finally, Eugene collapsed to the floor, bleeding. The officer, administering the punishment began kicking at Gene, yelling for him to get up until he broke.

“Cassandra.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sulke. See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?” He motioned to another officer to bring him his prison clothes. “Put them on.” Eugene

did so and was led to his cell. There was no attempt to treat his wounds.

As Eugene listened to the jail door slam shut, he looked at the bunk beds with another inmate sitting on the lower bunk. He motioned Eugene to the top one. He slowly climbed up, but he was too sore to make it on his own, so his cellmate helped him.

“They beat you up?”

Eugene said nothing.

“What’d you do?” his cellmate asked, but Eugene remained silent. “My name is Fernando.”

“Eugene.”

Neither said a word for a while and then Eugene spoke up. “I didn’t do anything.”

His cellmate didn’t laugh. “I didn’t do anything except run away.”

“Run from what?”

“From work.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They don’t pay you much for work anymore. There used to be welfare and other stuff they call hand-outs. Some of that still exists, but if you don’t qualify and need money the company you work for loans it to you. You have to pay it back with your next paycheck—with interest. If you can’t pay it back, they let the loan ride with a penalty charge. You can’t leave the company until you pay back the loan or they throw you in jail. You’re charged with embezzlement. What a joke. I didn’t embezzle any money, but that’s what I was charged with.”

Eugene knew that was going on. He even recommended the loan program to many of his clients. He didn’t know or want to know that they charged you with embezzlement, or that they put you in jail for failing to pay back the loan. He assumed, and was led to believe, that they just took the money back out of one’s next paycheck.

“There’s a lot of shit going down they don’t want anyone knowing about.” Fernando looked downcast. He didn’t say anything for a while, and then he saw a few drops of blood on the floor. “You’re still bleeding.”

Fernando got up. “Guard! Guard!”

“What do you want?”

“Don’t you got something for Eugene? He’s bleeding from the beating.”

“Shit! All right.” The guard opened the cell door and ordered Eugene down. He handcuffed him and led him away.



“Mr. Casimir, Alberto Martinez is on Line One,” Judy, the personal secretary, said to Jaydan Casimir, Commandant of the Lightning Squad at Command Headquarters in Old Chicago, Illinois.

“Alberto, this is a pleasant surprise.”

“No, it’s not. What the hell is going on there? Why is Eugene Sulke in prison?”

“Yes, sir, I understand how you feel. I gave strict orders not to bother him unless he’s really committing a crime. Unfortunately, he was at the scene of a triple murder. These were my men, Al. We picked him up speeding out of my territory.”

“Sulke isn’t the type to do that. I doubt if he’s ever owned a gun. Are you sure? Could someone else have done it?”

“Yes, sir. We know who it is. It was Cassandra O’Reilly.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, but if you knew he couldn’t have done it, why did you arrest him?”

“We needed to question him. He fingered Cassandra from jail. Do you want us to let him go? I can call the judge and have him released immediately.”

Martinez hesitated for the moment. “I’ll call you back. Don’t do anything until I do.”

Casimir hung up. He was ready to call the prison to check on Sulke’s condition, but obeyed orders not to do anything. An hour later Martinez was on the line.

“We can’t let him go. My people think Cassandra and Ray are using him. They want to radicalize him and use him to start a revolution. Now, I know Sulke is no radical but the O’Reilly’s are. They’ll work on him until he does their bidding.”

“You’re right, sir. What do you want me to do with him?”

“I want a quick trial and execution.” Even Jaydan Casimir was stunned at this.

“You there, Jay? I understand you got the judges in your pocket. Is there going to be a problem?”

“No! No problem.”

“Good. Look, there’s one more thing. These radicals—your suspects—they’re probably going to try and spring him, so be on guard. Understand?”

“Absolutely, Al. We can get a trial in about a week, followed by a same day execution.”

“Good.”



Ray and Cassandra reached Sean’s house around eight that night. “Man, look at you with that big barrel chest,” Sean said as he hugged him. “What do you do for exercise—turn rocks into gravel with your bare hands?” Sean spoke with a slight Irish accent.

“Yeah,” Ray said, “and I chew nails for an in-between snack.” Ray was powerfully built with a massive neck and square head. Only about 5-10, he looked like a human bulwark, with a pug nose and square jaw.

“Hi, Sean,” Cassandra said.

“Cassie,” he said. Sean gave her a great big hug too and then pinched her ass.

Cassandra just smiled. “Nice to know you haven’t changed.”

“Cass,” Ray said, stretching her name out and looking at her sideways. Sean wore an impish grin. He was about fortyish and wiry with wild eyes.

“Well, what kind of trouble are you two in that you need my help?” The two filled him in, and Ray asked him to help out.

“You need me to get your stuff, right?”

“I don’t want to impose,” Ray said.

“No problem. Just write down what you need.”

“The Squad might be watching the house. Do you have a gun?”

“Robbing houses is my business, buddy. Of course, I’m always protected.”

“You may be followed.”

“How do you think I’ve lasted all these years? I know how to lose the Squad or the RAC. I’ve been doing it for a long time.”

“Thank you for helping,” Cassandra said.

“My pleasure. Say, Ray, you think when we’re done here you can rent her out for a night?”

Ray and Cassandra understood Sean.

“Just kidding.” Looking at Cassandra, “It’s just my way of saying you’re really a dote.”

Cassandra had a quizzical look. “He means cute,” Ray said.

“You should get going,” Cassandra said. “It’s a long drive.”

“Don’t worry about a thing. Take the upstairs bedroom on the right. It’s a bit small, but you’ll be comfortable.”

“Thanks,” Ray said.

Ray couldn’t sleep well and Cassandra sensed his worry. Still, he lay in bed and even faked a few snores so Cassandra could get some sleep. Ray even thought he really did nod off for a while, but he spent most of the time considering a plan. He worried about Eugene, and he worried about Cass and himself. Now he’d involved a fourth person. It might mean the end of his operation. He was the leader of the ex-Blues, and if he was in exile no one would lead any revolution. Old America was sick and dying, and he felt that few people knew that it was. He needed Eugene on his side and he needed to split. *What to do?* It was Ray’s last thought before he and Cassandra awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs frying downstairs. Sean was singing some Irish ditty.

“Top of the mornin’ to yah.”

“How’d it go last night?” Ray asked.

“Look in the parlor and see for yourself.”

Ray and Cassandra saw all their stuff: computer, monitor, radio, private phone, portfolio, trackers, and other stuff. Now they could set up operations from Sean’s house.

“Come on, you two, before breakfast gets cold. You can play ‘good guy/bad guy’ later.” Sean picked up on the bags under their eyes and knew they slept little. Ray wolfed down his breakfast while Cassandra picked at hers.

“I’m not that hungry,” Cassandra said as she went into the parlor to set up the equipment. Ray continued to eat his own breakfast and then turned to his wife’s plate. He began eyeing some tasty morsel as Sean just smiled at his antics.

“Ray!” shouted Cassandra from the parlor.

“Better see what the little woman wants,” Sean said, with a sly grin.

Ray came in and saw Cassandra had everything set up and fretted at an email sent by Judy, their mole in Old Chicago. As Ray began reading he saw what so alarmed his wife.

“Why would he be in Joliet?” Cassandra asked.

“He’s in a lot of trouble, Cass.”

“There’s another email, too, from Judy,” she said. They read it together as their faces went ashen.

“No, Ray. They’re going to execute him. Ray, we’ve got to get him out of there.”

“It’s up to that lawyer now. The problem is his company might not even know he’s in trouble. This is a Squad prison with Squad judges. They pretty much make their own rules. Access to an attorney usually only occurs after a trial is announced. That lawyer will have very little time to prepare for a trial.”

“If it’s Squad judges trying him, what chance will Gene have?”

“On his own—none. Remember, though, he has government connections. They can at least delay the process enough for us to spring him.”

“Whoa!” Sean said. He’d just entered the room and heard the conversation. “They’re looking for you, my man.”

“That was confirmed in another email,” Cassandra said.

“Well, you got to stay as far from Joliet as possible.”

“But, Sean,” Cassandra said, “I’m responsible for the trouble he’s in. We can’t leave him there. That wouldn’t be right.”

“For the moment there’s nothing we can do, Cass, and you know it,” Ray said.

Cassandra looked down, and then she thought of something. “If Gene can’t get to his lawyer, maybe we can.” She typed Everson into the search engine and got the contact page for Eugene’s company. “Should we email them or phone them?” Cassandra asked.

Sean volunteered the answer on this one. “Phone them. You can block your number, but with an email they’ll have your return address.”

Ray called. He couldn’t get through to Stu Everson so he left a message, and turned to his wife. “That will have to do.”

“What do we do now?” Cassandra asked.

“We wait and see what develops.”



Eugene returned an hour later, still smarting. He crawled up to the top bunk with assistance from Fernando.

“How you feeling, Eugene?”

“Better. I’m still sore though. I think I have a broken rib.”

“What did they do?”

“They just put a salve on me and then bandaged the lacerations. I told them about the rib, but the doctor just felt my rib cage and told me it wasn’t broken. No X-ray or anything. Christ, I’m sore.”

“Did they let you call your lawyer?”

Eugene was sullen. “What kind of justice is this?”

“It’s Squad justice.”

“But it’s not American justice.”

Fernando was quiet and Eugene fell asleep.

The next morning they were lined up for breakfast. Everything was highly regimented. They marched into the cafeteria, which was dirty from the previous meal. Inmates were expected to clean up their own area. Eugene and Fernando sat down after tossing someone else’s trash away.

“Tell me more about this crime of yours,” Eugene said.

Fernando was tall and spoke slowly with a Spanish accent. Eugene sized him up as someone without much education. “Some economist from Harvard...I think his name was Galboth...or something...anyway he calls it urban feudalism.”

“Feudalism?”

“What does feudalism mean?” Fernando asked.

“Well, I’m no expert, but during the Middle Ages, in Europe, the aristocracy and the kings owned all the land. Peasants, called serfs, could be given some land by their vassal in return for their labor on his land, but they had no rights. They weren’t allowed to leave the land.”

“Yeah, that’s like what I had. Only instead of land it was money I was given. They had me by the balls.” Fernando grabbed his privies with a big grin on his face, and then laughed.

The whistles began blowing, indicating breakfast was over. They marched back to their cells.

Fernando sat down on his bunk and motioned Eugene to sit next to him.

“So, Eugene, are you married?”

“My wife committed suicide several months ago.”

“Oh, man, I’m sorry. How are you dealing with it?”

Eugene didn't answer at first, but his face became red and turned sour. "The Commandant raped my wife. She killed herself over it." Eugene looked down while Fernando just stared at him, his mouth agape. "They accused me of killing three of his men, but the only one I want to kill is him. Now, here I am. The bastard stole my wife and sends me to prison."

"That's incredible! My wife left me, and I don't know why. We were as happy as two people could ever be. Then she got into trouble with loans from her work. We ran off together but they caught us the first night. They told me to go home and took her to jail. They wouldn't let me see her for days. Then one day I went to a lawyer who got me in; only she was gone. They said she was released, but she never came home."

Eugene just stared at his new friend. "Where did she go? Did she go back to her old job? What did the lawyer say? What'd he do for you?"

"The lawyer was working for free. She wouldn't do anything else. Anyway, the only thing she agreed to do was get me into the jail, but I couldn't find my wife until I got a big envelope from some lawyer. It was divorce stuff. I was accused of being a bad husband who let his wife get into debt. I was told to sign the papers, but I refused. Then she came to the house with some other men. Gene, she was horrid to me. I never saw her like that before."

"What was she like before? And what did she say that made her so horrid?"

"Oh, she was always smiling; so cheerful. Whenever I was feeling down, she'd pick me up. She'd say something funny. Whenever things went wrong for us, which was a lot, and I'd say, 'Honey, I screwed up. I'm so sorry,' she'd put her arms around me and say, 'that's okay, sweetheart. It's not your fault.' I tell you, Gene, she was always wonderful that way."

Gene grabbed his shoulder in a friendly gesture.

"When she came over with those men it wasn't her anymore. One of the men said 'Sign the papers,' real mean like. When I hesitated, she got real mad at me. Said I caused her to get in trouble. She said I was a lousy husband. I was really scared. I thought she'd say, 'It's okay, darling.'"

"I don't understand, Fernando. How could someone change that fast? You said she was only in that jail a few days. What the hell happened?"

"My friend Jaime thinks she went to the camp."

"Camp?"

“Yeah. It’s where they do things to you. They take you there when they want to change you; make you into somebody different. They monkey around in your head; turn you into whatever they want. They make you think differently.” He stopped, looking troubled. Then he turned to Eugene. “Do you think that’s what happened to her?”

“I don’t know, Fernando; maybe.”

Fernando looked away, feeling sad again. “I sure miss her.”

Gene just hugged him. “I know, buddy. I sure miss Catherine.”

“It’s not so bad being in prison when you got a friend to help you do time with.”

Suddenly, a guard came to the cell door and ordered Fernando to come with him. Fernando turned to his friend with a fearful expression on his face. “They’re coming for me, Gene. Don’t let them take me to the camp.”

“What’s this about, guard?”

“Shut up, you, and mind your own business.”

“Gene, don’t let them take me.” Then, Fernando turned to the guard with a most frightful look. “Leave me alone. I want to stay in jail.”

“Please, guard, I don’t want to cause any trouble. Please, Fernando is scared to death.”

“Scared of what? All I know is the warden told me to get you. Jesus Christ, you think I was taking you to the death house or something. Now stop this whining and come with me. You’re probably being released.”

“Maybe he’s right, Fernando. Maybe they’re letting you go home.”

Fernando looked at the guard, still fearful. “Can Eugene come with me?”

“No, just you. Now come on out of there.”

Fernando started to resist and Gene came to his aid. He tried to get the guard off of Fernando, but another guard came in and beat Eugene. The two carried a screaming Fernando out of the cell while all the prisoners in that wing began screaming as well.

Afterwards, Eugene felt a little silly. *They were just going to release him. It’s so ridiculous that someone would go out screaming about a camp; and me, going to his rescue like they were going to execute him or something.*

As time passed, Eugene couldn’t forget what Fernando said. Then he thought about some of the things the pundits were talking about. *If you couldn’t get along you should be made to get along.* Jeez, thought Eugene,

What if taking your freedom away isn't enough. Could they really take your mind too?



“Mr. Casimir, you have a call on Line One. It’s Mr. Martinez.”

“Thank you, Judy,” Casimir said, switching to Line One. “Al, I’ve already spoken to the D.A. and—”

“That’s not why I called. It’s all over Washington.”

“What is?”

“Eugene Sulke! Rather, the situation he’s in. The word is out that you fucked his wife, he’s pissed off about it, and you’re about to permanently silence him. Nothing about the murder. Of course the mood in the Populist Party is it wouldn’t make any difference. They think we believe it’s okay to kill anybody we don’t like.”

“But, Al, a few recalcitrant Populists has never been a problem before.”

“You don’t understand, Jay. I don’t have god-like powers. We’re not talking about some worthless minority, some detritus off the street; we’re talking about a white professional, non-political, Middle Class brat being picked on. The whole goddamned country is going to cheer for this pest.”

“You’re right, of course, Al. Should I have him released?”

“I guess you’ll have to, but I would imagine he’s going to go to the news media, or his friends, like those real criminals, and play this up as if you’re the bad guy. There may even be a movement to get rid of the Lightning Squad. Christ, what a mess.”

“Wait! I have an idea,” Casimir said. He explained his plan to Martinez, who listened revived and with glowing satisfaction.

“That’s going to be expensive,” Martinez said. “A lot of resources are involved.”

“I realize that, Al, but just think: we’ll have a Eugene Sulke, which, if he should ever go to the press, will be singing our praises.”

Martinez just smiled. “All right, Jay, but don’t fuck it up.”

CHAPTER 8:

ESCAPE

“Cass, I just got an encrypted text from Judy,” Ray said. “The text just said that Martinez and Casimir are up to something, and it may be worse than the situation Gene’s already in. She asked not to be contacted until we hear from her.”

“It sounds serious. We rarely contact her anyway.” Cassandra looked bewildered, but then she turned to her husband with a curious expression. “Ray, do you suppose she was talking about that place...you know?”

Ray was silent and frowning. Sean grabbed a few beers from the fridge and passed them to Ray and Cassandra. The three sat around the kitchen table, and were silent for a while until Sean broke the silence. “Have you two thought about giving up your revolutionary ambitions and retiring to the New World while you can?”

“No!” Ray and Cassandra said simultaneously.

Sean just smiled. He was Ray’s first cousin on his father’s side; the brother of Ray’s father, James. He was born outside Dublin and his family moved to Old Chicago, following James, when Sean was just eight years old. He lost most of his accent in the ensuing years, but not completely. Now it was an eclectic combination of Irish brogue and upper mid-western twang. “You two are the most stubborn people I’ve ever met. You’re wanted for murder and they’re going to execute your friend, accomplice, or dupe. What’s it all for?”

Ray goggled and his face went red. “What’s it all for? You just look at the immediate problem and think we should bale out. The whole country’s our problem. We’ve lost our democracy, our vitality, and our sense of justice; not to mention everything else that’s wrong.”

“And don’t call Gene our dupe,” Cassandra said, looking angry.

“All right, all right,” Sean O’Reilly said. “Don’t gang up on me. I share your enthusiasm for change; well, maybe not as much as you two do, but I understand. All I’m saying is that you’re fugitives now. You show your face

and they'll execute you. Hell, they may not even wait for a trial. What can you realistically do? At least you'll be safe in the New World; and everything you're fighting against here won't exist over there."

"We can't abandon the people we leave behind," Cassandra said.

"Ray," Sean said, "you saw that professor you want to be the intellectual leader of a revolution; a sort of Trotsky. What did he say? Did he encourage you?"

Ray was reticent.

"It's as I thought," Sean said.

"No, it isn't. It's a process. He's scared. That's all. If he speaks or writes about the New World he loses the University's protection. If that happens, Martinez will be on him like a wolf to his prey. It will take time to gain his cooperation."

"The same for Eugene Sulke?" Sean said.

"Yes! Well, circumstances have changed somewhat, but it's all about the process."

The three remained silent for a time, and Cassandra grabbed another bottle of beer. "Have you been to the New World?" she asked Sean.

Sean swallowed a swig of his beer. His eyes enlivened and he smiled. "As a matter of fact, I have. Ah, tis a grand place, she is. That sense of vigor you talked about—" looking at Ray—"it's there in New America. They're building a future over there while you two try to rebuild a past over here. There's a sense of democracy that we've never had here. There's no wealthy class with the power to influence who and how their nation is governed. They even have a fourth branch of government—the People's Branch."

Sean had the look of someone seeing a glorious painting for the first time. "They choose one hundred people at random from a pool of anyone willing to serve, and they get to veto anything that comes out of government—any bill, court decision, police action; shit, anything. Now, that's democracy. And because these one hundred are chosen at random, no one can use any influence they might have to get their own way. There's no office to run for; there's no cabal to exert a special power. It is rule of the people, by the people, and for the people—for real this time."

"Now you know why we have to fight," Ray said. "This is what people want."

"I know, but does anyone else?"

Ray and Cassandra looked bewildered, but did not answer.

“Look, you guys, Old America is dead. No one is revolting. When you figure that out, the New World is waiting for you.”

“So how come you didn’t stay?” Cassandra asked.

“Ah, tis a glorious place, but not for an old criminal like me. There’s too much order there. I thrive on chaos; the thrill of the challenge. Besides, these people need me here as well. I rob from the rich and give to the poor—a regular robbing hood,” Sean said, grinning.

Cassandra was slightly amused. “I think I’ll check for messages,” she said.

“Another stout, mate?” Sean said.

“Sure.”

“Ray!” yelled Cassandra from the parlor. Ray looked concerned as he walked into the parlor.

Cassandra just looked up at Ray with a sheepish smile. “Eugene is free.”

“The lawyer?”

“According to Judy it was your brother who got him out. He’s bragging that he talked Casimir into releasing him. Dennis is taking him home as we speak. This must be what Judy meant about Jay being up to something. He probably planned this.”

Ray looked worried, and he didn’t respond immediately. He sat back down at the kitchen table and took a swig of his beer while Sean and Cassandra just stared at him like a Greek visitor waiting to hear from the Pythia.

“Well, I suppose that was what Judy meant. On the one hand, Gene is going to see us as the ones who put him in prison, and Dennis, the long lost friend, is the one who got him out.”

“I guess there goes a major piece of the revolutionary puzzle,” a smiling Sean O’Reilly said. Cassandra looked annoyed while Ray looked perplexed.

“I know my brother is up to something. We know Jay Casimir was responsible for Catherine’s death, and I believe Eugene either believes it or is unsure of him. He also knows that Dennis works for Casimir. I don’t believe that just springing Eugene out of the joint is enough to cement a relationship with Dennis.”

Sean looked on curiously. “So you think you may still be able to win Eugene over?” he asked.

“Yeah, I do,” Ray said. “Still, we’re in a bad way right now. We’ll need to lay low for a while and see what develops. We’re going to have to assume Dennis removed our tracker from Gene’s car. We need to put ours back on.”

“And take his off,” Cassandra said.

“No! Then Dennis will know we’re close by. Furthermore, he’ll just put his back on and take ours off again. He’ll also put some men on Gene’s car. We have to put ours on, but let Dennis think we’re on the run.”



“Is this for real? Am I really free?” Gene asked.

“Free as a bird,” Dennis said.

Eugene told Dennis the things Fernando talked about and then noticed something peculiar. “This isn’t the way home.”

“We’re going to your parents’ house.”

“My...why?”

“They know you were in Joliet. They’re worried. They want to see you.”

Eugene looked frustrated. “How did they know that, Den? I didn’t want them to know about prison. My mom would shit. How did they find out?”

“Calm down, Genie. When you didn’t show up for work, and your boss couldn’t reach you, the company lawyer called them up.”

“I don’t understand, Den. How did the lawyer know? They wouldn’t let me call him or work.”

“I know. They can be dicks sometimes. Well, somehow the lawyer found out and he tried to call you. When that didn’t work, he had the number of your next of kin. That’s how your mother found out.”

“I still don’t understand. How did the lawyer know I was in jail?”

“He’s a lawyer, Gene. He probably figured it out.”

“What about confidentiality and all? Why would he discuss this with my parents?”

“How do I know, Genie? You’re free, my man. That’s what’s important.”

Gene was silent while Dennis just smiled. “Anyway, that’s why we’re going to Countryside. They want to know you’re all right.”

Eugene was silent for a while, and then turned to his friend. "My cellmate, Fernando, said they don't stick pretrial people in Joliet unless they're pretty sure they're guilty. It saves them in transportation costs."

"The important thing is you're out now."

"Is there any truth to this camp he was talking about?"

Dennis laughed.

"He was scared to death of going there. He begged me not to let anyone take him. Then, just before you rescued me, a guard told Fernando to come with him."

"So you think they led him away to some camp?" Dennis couldn't stop laughing. "And you believed him?"

"He told me about his wife. How they weren't just husband and wife, but best friends. How sweet she was, and then she disappeared for months. When she came back she was all different."

"That's supposed to prove their existence?"

"So you don't believe it?"

"My guess is that Fernando left out a whole lot of stuff that would weaken his argument. What if they argued about money, or their living conditions? How educated was he?"

"Not well-educated, but I'm a pretty good judge of character. I tell you, Denny, he was sincere. Furthermore, he was genuinely afraid of being taken to that camp."

"I know you're a good judge of character, but these guys in prison are even better at it. They're sneaks and thieves. What was this guy in for anyway?"

"Embezzlement."

Dennis let out a laugh. "There you have it, Genie, my man. This guy was just putting on an act. If I didn't get you out of there just now, he might have sold you a nice chunk of downtown Old Chicago. I'm telling you, Genie, embezzlers are the biggest sneaks and thieves you'll ever meet."

"But he said they only charged him with that because he couldn't pay his debt, and not because he embezzled funds."

"Let me put it this way, my man, what sounds more likely? That there is some camp where they hook you up to some machine, tell you how to think, and change your whole behavior, or that Fernando is a sneak or an uneducated fool who invents stories to get in your head?"

Gene looked really confused now. *Was Fernando a sneak or was he honest? I was sure of the answer before, but now....*

“Hey, Dennis; have you ever heard of a situation where if you borrowed money from your employer and couldn’t pay it back that you could never leave?”

“What?”

“Fernando said some Harvard professor called it ‘urban feudalism’.”

Dennis just guffawed again. “No, man, there’s no such thing. Boy, that Fernando really had you going.”

Eugene turned toward Dennis. He pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes.

“What?”

“That was my boss’s idea. They were supposed to take the money out of the employee’s pay...but suppose the paycheck was so small that the employee was forced to continue borrowing the money? In that case, the employer might want to keep that employee who had the boss’ money.... Oh my God, that’s where the embezzlement came from! The rationale must be that the employee was getting extra pay from his employer, and then looked to skip town with it.”

“Well, that’s the first I heard of that,” he said.

Eugene looked at Dennis sideways. “Dennis, why was I let out so easily? They wouldn’t let me call the company lawyer. Fernando said they don’t put people in a prison unless they were pretty sure they could keep you there. Why, Dennis? How did you get me out?”

“I talked Casimir into dropping the charges. They thought you shot those men. I knew you didn’t do it, and then the warden called up Casimir and told him you fingered Cassandra. That’s why I could get you out.”

“You have a pretty good relationship with the Commandant.”

Dennis hesitated. “It’s purely business, Gene. You didn’t tell me before, that you knew Cassandra.”

“She popped up from the floor of my back seat a couple days after my visit to your house. I’m not sure how she got in, but I didn’t see her at first.”

“What did she say?”

Eugene turned to Dennis with a sardonic smile. “She said you were bad.”

Dennis howled. “Let me tell you something about her and my brother, who, no doubt, put her up to that. They’re both murderers. They both killed RAC and Squad soldiers. They want the Lightning Squad to return to

supporting the Populist Party. I tell you, Genie, my man, they're idealists who want to use you to start a revolution."

"I know. I told Cassandra I wasn't interested. Look Dennis, there's a lot I'd like to change, but someone else will have to take the lead on that."

"Good."

"She told me your Commandant put you up to our reacquaintance: that you work for this Casimir character. Furthermore, he was the one who drove Catherine to suicide."

"It's not true," Dennis said, although the joviality was gone now. "I'm just a simple squad leader. Why would Casimir have anything to do with me?"

"You admitted you talked Casimir into freeing me; dropping the charges against me. Surely, you have some relationship."

"Cassandra put you up to this. I should have warned you she might approach you. She's like that—good at poisoning people's minds."

Eugene appeared sullen, but Dennis put on a big grin. "What you need, my friend is a good stiff drink." Dennis was playfully pointing his finger in Gene's chest as he said it. "I'm sure Dean's got a few brewskies in the fridge. Yessiree, my man, it's time to celebrate."

Gene began to lighten up as he relaxed in his seat. *I am indeed free and Dennis got me out.*



Dennis pulled up to the parents' home. As they got out, Eugene's mother, Joanne, was running toward Gene with her arms out. "Oh, you're home," she said, sobbing as they hugged.

"Hi, mom, dad. Sorry to put you through this."

"Hello, sir," Dennis said to Dean, extending his hand.

Dean just scowled at Dennis, and then turned to Eugene. "What's this about you being in jail, son?"

"Yeah, it's kind of a long story dad, but Dennis got me out."

Dean turned to Dennis with a suspicious look, and then a look of acceptance. "Well, both of you come on in."

They sat down at the table, where Dean furnished the beer, and Joanne started making some sandwiches from the leftover roast beef. "Oh, you

poor boy,” Joanne said to her son, as she handed him a sandwich. “First Catherine, and now this. Now, tell me everything.”

As Eugene relayed his harrowing encounter with Cassandra and Joliet, Dean kept an eye on Dennis.

“What I don’t understand,” Dean said, “was how you got him out of there. Aren’t you, like, at the low end of the totem pole?”

“Mr. Sulke, Gene’s my friend. When I heard he got arrested I knew he didn’t kill those guys. I talked Commandant Casimir into dropping the charges.”

“How could a guy like you get in to see the Commandant of the Lightning Squad?”

“Dennis,” Joanne said, “did the Lightning Squad have anything to do with Catherine’s....”

“Oh no,” said Dennis. “He’s a good man. I got to know him when he found out that I knew Gene. I’ll admit the Commandant was a bit suspicious of him because he’s close to Professor Harold Zinney. He just asked me to keep an eye out for him.”

“Like a spy?” Dean said.

“Oh, no, sir. Like a friend.”

Eugene tried to change the subject, and after a couple hours, Dennis escorted his friend home, where the Lexus was parked in his driveway.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Dennis reached into his pocket and gave him the car keys. “It was a fun drive,” he said, smiling.

“Are you going to have any trouble getting home tonight?” Gene asked, realizing curfew was hours ago.

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I can’t thank you enough, buddy.”

“Don’t mention it. Why don’t you come over to the house next Saturday afternoon? Teresa would love to see you again. We haven’t seen you since...well....”

“Uh, yeah, sure, Den. About two?”

“Two it is, my man.”



Gene walked into his dark home; now darker than ever. The nights were getting colder and it had begun to snow. *I should put my car in the garage. Ugh, Catherine's car. I'm going to have to do something with it.* He turned on the television for a little while, and then turned it off again. He took a bottle of wine from the fridge, poured himself a glass, and then collapsed into his favorite chair. He relaxed, and then he reached for his phone and called Professor Zinney.

"Hello, Gene. I was just thinking about you. How are you managing?"

Gene filled Zinney in on what'd been happening to him, and Gene asked him for his thoughts.

"Wow, Gene. You've sure got a lot of things on your plate. First off, I can't believe Catherine is dead. She was a wonderful lady. I'm sorry I couldn't make it to her funeral, but I was still out of the country."

"I know, Professor. I still miss her a lot, but I've got to concentrate on the immediate things going on around me. What about the promotion? You know the type of work I do."

"I understand your trepidation about taking the job. You're being offered a promotion—the very thing you've worked for—knowing you'd be contributing to...well, let's say to nothing good. It's a difficult decision, but there are few easy decisions presented to any of us nowadays. I'm forbidden to talk about a world I'm passionate about, and you are asked to be a part of something you don't believe in. Yet, I do as they tell me, and my guess is you'll take the promotion. We do it because the alternatives are worse."

"Professor, I know the academic answer to my question, but I guess I just can't get my head wrapped around why things are so bad. Why don't we have any charismatic leaders anymore? Why do so many people just accept the conditions?"

"Because they're powerless, Gene; like us. We do what we wished we didn't have to do, but we're powerless to do anything differently. Now, let's discuss something you do have more control over. How well do you know Dennis?"

"I've known him all my life."

"But there was a long gap in your friendship. Do you still feel like he's your friend?"

"He rescued me from Joliet. I met his wife."

“So you said. What concerns me is his connection with Jaydan Casimir. If Casimir caused Catherine’s death, then why is Dennis associated with him?”

“He claims he doesn’t work for him; that he’s just a squad leader.”

“So how does a simple squad leader just march right into the Commandant’s office and convince him to free you—when he shouldn’t even know that you were arrested in the first place?”

“Well, he claims that Casimir asked him to keep an eye out for me when he found out we were childhood friends.”

“Gene, he’s supposed to be a simple squad leader. Why wouldn’t Casimir take it down the chain of command? Why would he have approached him directly?”

“You’re right. I never thought about that.”

“That’s because you’re too close to the problem. You did the right thing in calling me.”

“Wait! I just thought of something else. I was talking to him about Fernando and the camp he was talking about. I don’t know why it didn’t register before, but I never mentioned what went on there before Dennis started laughing. And yet, he seemed to know that there was a machine they hook you up to, and how they could make you think and believe whatever they want. I never said any of those things, and Fernando never mentioned anything about a machine to me.”

Gene waited for the professor to respond, but there was a pause before he continued. “If I were you, Gene, I’d stay as far away from Dennis as possible.”

“I’m supposed to go over to his house on Saturday.”

“Make up some excuse, Gene. Going to his lair is not a good idea.”

“What about Fernando? Do you believe there’s any truth to what he said?”

“There’s a lot of truth to what he said, and that’s why you need to stay away from Dennis.”

“You’re the third person to tell me that. In fact, you almost sound like Catherine. Those were almost her last words to me. Then Cassandra starts popping up from the floor of the back seat and tells me to stay away from Dennis. I know that she and Ray, her husband, want me to lead some revolution, but I don’t know what either of them expect me to do—not that I want to do anything.”

“I know Ray,” Zinney said. “He wants me to lead a revolution with you in New America. He’s nuts, and I told him so. You don’t start a revolution. If a revolution is going to occur it happens when the elements are right. Redd Piper never started any revolution. He just wanted the freedom to create his idea without interference from the government. His ambition was simply to get rich, but once he made it possible for the average guy to not only get a job, but become an owner, then no one was going to take that away without a backlash; and a backlash is exactly what the government got.

“Gene, you see when people are fed up enough you can’t stop them; you can’t take anything away from them; and then, if there is a charismatic leader, you get a revolution. What’s important to understand, Gene, is that the right elements have to be there in the first place. Now, they’re mostly in place here, but there’s one thing missing—something to fight for. You have to have something to fight *for*, Gene. It’s not enough to fight against something. That’s the mistake these guys always seem to make. They assume that if things are bad enough, people will revolt. Now, sometimes they do, but they’re usually crushed. When people fight for something they feel sure will make their lives better, they won’t be crushed because they’ll never give up. They’ll fight for their vision of the American dream. They’ll keep fighting forever if necessary. Their sons and daughters will do the same. That’s why the cooperatives never died. You can blow them up, but they still exist in New America. You’d think that they could never stand up to the likes of the full muscle and power of the armed forces of the United States, but they did, and they won.

“It was like that during the Revolutionary War: An American economy with little money and a ragtag army taking on the greatest power in the world at that time—and winning. Even if we lost that war we’d win independence eventually, because our founding fathers had a taste of freedom, and they’d give their lives to keep it.”

“But, professor, there’s still something that isn’t clear to me. You said that the New World was created because people had something to fight for—the cooperatives. Ray and Cassandra want to bring them back as well as the original Lightning Squad. It’s their dream. Even if they’re crushed, you said that dream will never die.”

“You’re right, Gene, but here’s the problem. The dream did die. Ray, Cassandra, you and I, and a few others know about them; but not the

people. No one talks about them. There's no news about them. Those who still remember the Rust Belt Wars don't want to talk about it; and most people grew up in a world where this was unknown to them. All they know about the new country is that it's a bad place, ruled by bad people. You know the truth, I know the truth, but until the rest of the country does there's no dream to fight for."

Eugene sighed. "That's what you mean when you say they can't win. Still, I'm sympathetic to their effort. I just don't want to be used by them."

"Good! I'm glad to hear you say that or you'd be in even bigger trouble."

"Professor, if the dream of a better world is dead, what should they be doing?"

"If Ray and Cassandra want to change the world, they'll have to get people elected who will end the communication blackout with New America first. Once people know about what's there they'll demand they be allowed to visit there. That's where it starts, Gene."

"That sounds like a good idea, professor, but Ray and Cassandra seemed hell bound to start a revolution. They don't want some piecemeal approach. I'm so confused, professor. I don't want to be part of their plans, but I'm sympathetic to their effort. I've come to hate much of what I'm doing, but I'm scared of quitting, and turning down the promotion might mean the end of my career."

"Don't feel guilty about your job, Gene. You do what is necessary and what you were trained for. We're part of the corporate system. It exists; it controls; it has become the government. It is the world we've created. You're sympathetic to the problems you see, but you are part of the corporate culture. We're all part of it—the corporate-owned stores we shop at, the cars we buy—everything. We know something better is out there, but it isn't here. They've destroyed what could have been the New America here, created brutal paramilitary groups to make sure it stays this way, and then turned over the criminal justice system to them."

"What about Dennis? Of the three, he seems the most dangerous. What does he want?"

"I'm not sure, since I never met him. My guess is he's ambitious; how else would he have come to the attention of the Commandant? What matters is that he works with or for him, and that's the same person who ruined your marriage and led to the tragedy that ensued. He can't be trusted."

Gene, I say this to you—you are being used and are caught in the middle of two competing forces. One is foolish and the other is disingenuous. They're both dangerous. The best solution I can suggest is to get out of being in the middle of all this. I don't know how you can do this, and I don't even know if it is possible, but for your own safety, security, and peace of mind you must escape from them."

"I know, professor, but how? Dennis owns me. He got me out of Joliet, and I can't just ignore him. Then there's Cassandra, who must have a key to my car. I suppose I could change the locks or get a new car, but my guess is I'm not going to get rid of her either."

"Gene, I know that Ray and Cassandra are going to pressure you to go to New America. They want you and me to be the intellectual leaders of their revolutionary plans. They want you to write about the New World, while I write about what's really happening here. The problem is I'd be expelled from the university, and a communication blackout prevents you from communicating what you see in New America. That's why their plans will never work. Furthermore, our two radicals will own you as well."

After Eugene hung up he poured himself another glass of wine and slumped into the recliner. *Oh Catherine, I need you now. I'm sorry I wasn't listening before. You knew what was going on. You couldn't tell me because you knew I'd act irrationally, and try and do something to that Commandant. It's what he wanted, wasn't it? He wanted me to do something stupid so he could get me. What if he already has me and I just don't know it yet? Even if I should take the new job, would I be able to keep it? Or is my fate already sealed? I'm in a vice, and I don't know how to get out. Even if I take the new job, will these people still try to control my life? Will I ever have a life again? Or am I just fucked?*

Eugene poured another glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, hoping it would help put him to sleep. He listened to some Bach and tried to relax. *What is the end game here? Should I accept the promotion? Can I stay away from all those who want to manipulate me? Could I fall in love again? Do I want to?* Through it all, the words from Harold Zinney echoed in his head: *escape, escape, escape.*

CHAPTER 9:

HELL HOUSE

Ray and Cassandra reached Gene's house around midnight. Ray parked his car about a block away, and stayed in the shadows as he approached the Lexus. He kept looking around, but he saw no sign of anyone. Cassandra parked about two blocks away, and got out to give Ray some cover.

Once Ray reached the car, he put his tracker on, and then ran out of there. He met up with Cassandra by his car and exchanged some instructions with her before she ran to her own car, and followed Ray back home.

Cassandra was about a quarter mile behind her husband when she noticed a pair of headlights behind her. She fished out her phone and pressed a button. "Ray, I think I'm being followed."

"We can't take any chances. You remember the Squeeze Play?"

"Sure."

"Follow my lead."

They drove on for about a mile until Ray found just the right spot to turn off; a lazy country lane. He made a right and then pulled over to the side of the road, and turned the engine off. Cassandra got there a minute later, turned right, but she kept going past her husband. The pursuer turned off as well and sped past Ray, who began following the guy. Cassandra slowed down, forcing the chaser to do the same. Ray drove up to him, while Cass turned around, and confronted her pursuer. They ordered the guy out of the car at gunpoint.

"What's the matter? I didn't do anything."

"Let me see your driver's license," Ray demanded.

"Arnold Campbell," he said to Cass. "Lives in Kyler. That's about fifty miles from here." Turning to Campbell: "What are you doing here?"

"I have a right to be here."

Ray slugged him and Campbell tried to fight back. He landed one on Ray's chin, but only hurt his hand. Ray took out a stun gun and shocked

him. Campbell screamed in agony.

“What are you doing here?” Ray said again, flashing a menacing look.

“Nothing,” he cried.

He was shocked again. The pain was too much for him and he began to squeal. “Dennis told me to follow anyone who approached the Lexus. That’s all I know.”

“WRONG! YOU KNOW MORE. TELL ME EVERYTHING.”

“I told you everything.”

Ray took out the stun gun and held it to his face. “You tell me everything now!” Then he pointed it at his crotch.

“Please, don’t.” Ray and Cassandra were both screaming at him. “Okay, okay. This is all I know. I was supposed to follow you and report back on exactly where you went. That’s all they told me.”

Ray kicked him hard. Campbell writhed in pain, and was rolling around on the ground when he looked at Ray with a fearful expression. “I’m sorry. I wish I did know more, but I don’t.”

Ray stunned him a couple more times, and Campbell screamed each time he was zapped. “TELL ME ABOUT EUGENE SULKE!”

Campbell could barely speak now. He tried to catch his breath, and then his voice came out as a feeble whisper. “He owned the car I saw you near.”

“What else?” Ray said.

“Nothing.” Campbell was still talking at a whisper and showing signs of extreme agony.

Ray was about to kick him again, when Campbell uttered a feeble, “Something about Hell House.”

Ray and Cassandra just looked at each other. Then Ray flashed a vicious look at Campbell. “WHERE IS HELL HOUSE?”

Fighting back the pain, Campbell struggled to gather himself. “They’re going to take Sulke there when they finish it.”

“WHERE IS IT?” There was no answer. Ray kicked him again.

Campbell screamed and clenched his teeth, fighting back the pain. Tears flowed down his cheek.

“WHERE IS IT?” Campbell was silent. “WHERE IS HELL HOUSE LOCATED?” Campbell wasn’t moving or talking.

Cassandra felt for a pulse. “I don’t think he’s going to be answering any more questions. He’s barely alive.”

Ray just stared at Campbell, still flashing a menacing look, and then he turned to his wife. “You know, Cass, I’ve interrogated a lot of men and I don’t think I’ve ever administered so much punishment as this guy took without giving me his life story. They usually turn into such chatter boxes that they’re singing about the time they took the last cookie out of the jar. I don’t think this bird knows anything else.”

Cassandra stared down at Campbell, frowning. Then she turned to Ray with a fearful look. “Hell House, Ray? Not that place again!”



“Excuse me sir,” said Dennis’s secretary. “The Brigade Commander is on line two.”

“O’Reilly,” Dennis said.

“Goose’s dead,” Mad Dog said. “They found his body next to his car a few miles from Sulke’s home.”

“Shit. He was your best man. “

“Well, he’s a dead man now. He called me around midnight and told me he spotted your brother and his wife by Sulke’s car. He told me they got spooked and took off. Goose followed them and called me. He was supposed to update me, but I didn’t hear from him again. I sent a squad to his last known location, and they found his body near his car in a bedroom community a few miles from Sulke’s home.”

“Where was he heading?”

“West.”

“Thanks commander.” Dennis hung up and looked nervous.

Jaydan Casimir noticed something wrong and approached his assistant.

“What’s going on?”

Dennis filled him in.

“How much did you tell him?”

“Nothing. Only to follow him and stay in communication with us.”

“This is important, O’Reilly. Did you tell him about Hell House?”

“No, sir. I only told him the absolute minimum he needed to know in case he did get caught.”

“Good.”



Dennis stopped by Hell House, on the south side, to see how the work was going. Chills ran down his spine, but he couldn't understand where this angst was coming from. He walked over to a man named Bartolo, the Captain of the south side brigades, and the organizer of the security team.

"Captain Bartolo, are we almost ready?"

"We'll be ready by Saturday morning. Are you ready, O'Reilly?"

"I have a slight problem, Captain," Dennis said, "but it isn't anything for you to worry about. All those goddamn ex-Blues; they've been nothing but a pain. I swear to God, if we could stick them all in here, we could start the Blues up again; be a real kick ass team; just like they used to be—especially my brother. Goes in all fucked up; comes out all buddies again. We'd be hugging each other and he'd be saying he found the light. A real fucking laugh riot."

Bartolo nodded in agreement. "They're so damn idealistic—the Blues, I mean. I tell you, O'Reilly, the Lightning Squad was almost kaput. We were constantly broke. Fight the RAC. Give to the poor. What a load of shit. We'd be dead broke, and then we'd get our hands on loot from some RAC brigade—usually at the cost of a few lives—then what did we do with the haul? We'd give it to some homeless fuck who'd take it and say, 'Where were you guys when they fired me? I used to have a real job, now I get table scraps from the likes of you.' Yeah, that's the way they looked at us; like we were responsible, and now we're holding out on them. What the fuck?"

"Then Commandant Jaydan Casimir from that NOGOV organization took over. Said we needed to be run like a business. No more giving stuff away to people who don't appreciate it anyway. Now we keep it. Except your brother, that cunt of his, and a bunch of others wouldn't go along. We kicked them out of the Squad, but a bunch more went with them; some of our best men. I tell you, O'Reilly, I'd love to see them all treated."

Dennis smiled, nodding in agreement. "Absolutely, Captain!"

"Now, what is the problem I'm not supposed to be worried about?"

"My brother killed one of my men. It has nothing to do with Eugene. He'll be here."

“Do you know where Sulke is?”

“Oh, yeah. I have him tracked. Don’t worry, Captain, I’ll have him here Saturday. He’s coming over to my house, so there won’t be any problems.”

“I’m counting on you, O’Reilly. We’ve gone through a lot of trouble setting up Hell House. I’d hate to hear I wasted my time.”

Dennis just smiled. “Don’t worry, he’ll be here.”



Dennis was visibly upset. He turned to his wife, with the bad news. “That was Gene on the phone. He’s not coming over Saturday.”

“Den, we need him. What did he say?”

“Said he was needed at work. I told him to come over as soon as he finished. He just gave me some bullshit excuse. I don’t believe for a minute he’s going to work. He never works on weekends. In any event, I’ve got him tracked. If he goes anywhere, I’ll know.”

“What do we do if he’s telling the truth? What if he does go to work?”

“I got to think.”

“What if he just wants to stay home?”

“I don’t know.”

“Den, if he goes to work we’ll have to wait until he comes home. Once home, we can go get him.”

“I know, hon. Still, the issue is how do we get him?”

“Bring your service revolver.”

“Kidnap him? No, I can’t do that. Let me think.”

“I don’t care how you get him to Hell House, just get him there. Look at these clothes of mine. Do you know how long it’s been since I bought anything new? I’m sick of old, torn, tawdry clothes. I’m sick of buying second hand from some thrift store. You promised me I’d have new clothes.”

“I know, I know, Teresa, and you will.” Dennis then brightened up, and a smile grew on his face. “Wait! I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“I know how we can get Eugene to Hell House. I have to make a few calls first.”



Ray and Cassandra spent the rest of the week checking on Eugene's movements, and trying to figure out where Hell House was. They brought their friend Daniel in to hack into the Squad's central computer to see what he could find, but so far, getting in was proving to be quite difficult.

Eugene's movements were predictable and uneventful. He sometimes went to the office, and other times he went elsewhere. Nothing was out of the ordinary until Monday morning. Cassandra got up first and Ray slept late. When he got up Sean offered to make him some breakfast, but Ray chose coffee instead. He took his coffee into the parlor where Cassandra was at the desktop.

"Gene is still home."

"Doesn't he usually leave for work by this time?" Ray asked.

She checked the time. "He should have left a couple hours ago."

"Would he have checked for a tracker?"

"Gene?" Cassandra said, smiling. "He wouldn't even know where to look."

"Dennis?"

Cassandra looked up, stared at her husband, and looked worried.

"I better drive out there and see if he's really there or not," Ray said.

Sean walked into the room. "I'll go," he said. "You got an operation to run here."

"Would you really not mind?" Ray asked.

"Don't worry. I'll call you when I get there."

"I need to talk to Daniel," Ray said to Cassandra. Ray reached for his phone. "Daniel. It's Ray. We're not sure where Gene is. He should be at work, but the tracker indicates he's still home. Sean went to check on him, but I got a bad feeling about this. I think they're going to take him to Hell House."

"I did find something of interest when I was able to hack into some email where the number '123' came up. It's some sort of code. Do you think it might be important?"

"It could be. See if you can find mention of 'Hell House' with '123'. It'd also help if you can hack into Dennis's email. We might strike pay dirt

there.”

“Yeah, I’ve been trying, but haven’t been able to yet,” Daniel said.

“This might be a good time to bring Jimmy the Fox in,” Ray said. “He might be able to help.”

“I agree. In the meantime, I’ll try to find as much info as I can from the main computer. There’s still a ton of emails to go through.”

Ray dialed the Fox’s number and waited. “Jimmy, have you ever heard of ‘123’?”

“That sounds like one of the Squad’s codes. I broke the code book.... Give me a second.... Let me see if I can find it here.... Oh, yes. Here it is. Let’s see. Code 123 means ‘in process’.”

“In process as in something is being done but not completed?”

“I guess.”

“Look, Jimmy, do you think you could get a tracker on my brother’s car?”

“I suppose so, but wouldn’t he just check for it?”

“I understand you’re the best at hiding trackers.”

Jimmy was beaming. “Yeah, I guess the Squad still hides them the way I told them to.”

“Jimmy, do you suppose you might have a secret hiding place you haven’t told the Squad or Blues about?”

“I might. Where does he live? License plate would really help.”

Ray gave him all the details.

“Why do you want to track your brother anyway?”

“I’m hoping he goes to Hell House.”

“Shit! I hoped I’d never hear of that place again.”

“Me either.”



Almost three hours went by before the phone rang. It was Sean. “Yeah, Ray. Nobody’s home. His car is in the driveway. I rang the doorbell and knocked on the door, but no one answered. I went around the house, where there was a side window that I could see in, but I couldn’t see anyone inside or any sign that anyone was home.”

“Did you check to see if our tracker is still on?”

“Yeah. There are two trackers on his car—ours and theirs.”

“Thanks, Sean. Come on home.”

Cassandra just looked at him. “They got him, don’t they?”

Ray frowned and looked worried.



Ray’s phone rang. It was Daniel. “Ray! I’ve got it—Dennis’s password.”

“That’s great. How’d you do it?”

“It was that Hell House. I just typed in about a couple dozen variations and boom—there it was. Anyway, I scanned his emails, but there was nothing there. Then I looked at his document folder and there was a Notes subfolder. I opened that and, hello, there it was, ‘Hell House Notes.’ It’s on De La Salle Street, just a few blocks from Dennis’s house. Ray, Gene’s in a lot of trouble.”

CHAPTER 10:

THE INTERROGATION

48 Hours Earlier

Eugene Sulke woke up strapped to an ergonomic metal chair. It had a pair of straps which secured his wrists to its arm rests. He looked down and saw that the chair had leg straps as well, although they weren't used now. The chair was bolted to a cement floor in what appeared to be a basement clinic.

Immediately to the right of the chair was a desk with a stenotype machine on it.

Beyond the desk he saw what appeared to be a display monitor; although he could only see the back of it. He noticed another one to the left of it. Both monitors, if that's what they were, were suspended from the ceiling by a series of movable rods; perhaps made of steel.

Next to and below the left-most monitor was a desk with a laptop on it.

Further to his right, past the first monitor, was a door, and what appeared to be a small room.

Ahead of him was something appearing to be a hospital gurney about eight feet away. It was elongated, but it wasn't on wheels; it appeared to be bolted to the floor. The gurney was about seven feet long by three feet wide at one end, and about two feet wide at the other end. It was metallic and cushioned, with three pairs of straps.

Against the wall and beyond the gurney was a glass display case consisting of two metal shelves. On the bottom shelf were various kinds of instruments. He saw a barber's shaver and shears, an assortment of scissors, some gauze and bandages, and a general medical kit. There were a couple of peculiar looking instruments that Gene could not make out, and one scary looking instrument. It was tubular in shape, with a protruding needle at one end, and a series of wires that were wound up at the other end.

On the top shelf were a set of vials, needles, and bottles. There were also a couple of scalpels and an assortment of containers that appeared to be various drugs. There were glass doors that opened up to access these medical devices and supplies.

On the wall above the case was a clock, and just below the clock was a digital readout of the date—it was February twelfth, and the time was 2:33.

To the left of the clock was an opening that might be a hallway, but Eugene couldn't tell for sure.

To his immediate left, Eugene saw stairs leading upwards, and beyond the stairs was a small table with a single chair. Both were plain and appeared to be utilitarian.

The whole atmosphere had a clinical look and smell, and Eugene felt his heart pounding against his chest. *What is this place? Why am I here?* There were no windows and just some faint sounds coming from the hallway ahead of him. *There must be another room down there.*

He heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Eugene turned to look, and saw a man appearing to be a soldier or security guard. He was tall and lanky with broad shoulders, and he wore a Lightning Squad uniform. He was armed.

"So you're awake now," he said when he saw Eugene staring at him. He looked straight ahead and yelled, "Doctor, he's awake."

A few minutes later a rather small wiry man, appearing to be around fifty years of age with a balding head and beady eyes, emerged from the hallway. He was followed by a rather austere looking man of about the same age carrying something, and sitting down at the desk with the stenotype.

"Ah, you're awake, Mr. Sulke. Good, good," the man said. "Do you know why you're here?"

"No."

"You're here to get better." He said this with a silly smile, like a doctor talking to his patient.

"I don't understand. I'm not sick. Why am I strapped down? What is this place? Let me go."

"Aren't you facing a dilemma, Mr. Sulke?" Eugene just stared at the man, flashing an angry expression. He started to say something else but the guard slapped him with an open hand, striking the side of Eugene's face. He screamed in protest, and the soldier struck him again. Eugene tried to stand

up, but he couldn't get out of the chair. He could sense blood oozing from his bottom lip, and his left cheek felt numb from the blows. The guard was about to hit him again when the man stopped him. "Now, now, Hurd, you made your point."

Hurd stooped down until his head was even with Eugene's, and then he put his angry face directly in front of Eugene. "You answer the doctor properly. When he asks you a question, you answer directly to that question, understand?"

"Yes," Eugene said, bitterly.

"Yes, sir, mister," Hurd said. "Now, this is Doctor Sistrunk. You say 'yes, doctor' when you talk to him. Understand, shithead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Now, we can start afresh," Dr. Sistrunk said as Hurd resumed his normal position of parade rest. "Tell me, Eugene—may I call you Eugene?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Good, good. Tell me, Eugene, how did you meet Cassandra?"

"It was about a few months ago, I think."

"Try harder, Eugene. Was it in September?"

"I think it was August."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I just remembered. It was right after I was invited out for a barbecue by my friend, Dennis."

"Would that be Dennis O'Reilly?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Good, good."

Eugene noticed the austere man with a permanent frown typing away as he answered the doctor's questions.

He then turned back to the doctor. "What is this place?" Almost as soon as he got the question out he was viciously struck again by Hurd. Eugene shrieked in pain.

"You answer the doctor's questions, understand?" Hurd said. "And you don't ask questions—we do the asking, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Eugene answered meekly.

"Good, good," Sistrunk said. "Now tell me all about Cassandra."

Eugene told the doctor everything he could remember about her. He corrected himself numerous times. He couldn't stop his mind from

wandering when the doctor asked him another question. When he hesitated or looked puzzled Hurd would beat him again.

At last, Dr. Sistrunk stopped the interrogation. “Good, good, good, Eugene.”

Sistrunk wore a supercilious smile almost the whole time. He walked around in his lab coat like every move was carefully scripted. He had an unctuous manner, a haughty profile, and a slow, deliberate style of speaking.

“I think Eugene is hungry and thirsty, eh, Hurd?” Hurd was silent, but stood at parade rest next to Eugene. “Unstrap him, Hurd.”

Hurd did so, but as soon as Eugene was free he leaped up, pushed Hurd aside, and made a dash for the stairs. He didn’t get far, however. Hurd was too quick and strong for Eugene, who was out of shape. Hurd grabbed him from behind, shouted for the upstairs guard, who then hurried down, and the two forced Eugene back into the chair, strapping him back down. The upstairs guard went back to his post, while Hurd disappeared out of sight. When he returned a few minutes later he was carrying two truncheons. They were black, and about two feet in length.

Hurd had a vicious look on his face. “You shouldn’t have done that, man. You shouldn’t piss me off like that.”

He hung up one truncheon and grabbed the other. He then beat Eugene over the head with it. It was soft, so as to inflict pain without cracking the skull. Hurd struck Eugene in the head with it several more times, and then struck him about the neck and shoulders; Eugene screaming each time. Then he turned to his feet and ankles and struck him there.

When he finished with the soft one, he hung that one up and grabbed the other one. This one was made of a hard polymer. He swung it horizontally, striking Eugene in the stomach several times. Eugene wasn’t sure how much he screamed, but when he tried to speak he could barely utter a sound. Tears streamed down his bloodied and purplish face.

After Hurd finished his punishment, Dr. Sistrunk emerged from the hallway. He was no longer smiling, and wore a crooked frown. He was a little man, about five feet-six, skinny, and sometimes had glasses on and sometimes not.

“That was a very bad thing you just did,” he lectured. “What did you hope to accomplish, Mr. Sulke? You could never have gotten past Hurd; and

even if you did, you'd never make it past the upstairs guard. What did you get for your troubles? You got punished, Mr. Sulke."

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry, doctor," Eugene uttered in a raspy voice he didn't recognize as his own.

Sistrunk's frown was gone now and he put on a haughty look. "Eugene, I've treated many men. I assure you, there is nothing that you can do to avoid treatment. I've treated soldiers, politicians, journalists, and ordinary people such as yourself. I even treated a Blue Squad soldier. He was a tough one. He was angry, vicious, and stubborn. He would sit right in that chair you're sitting in now and spit in my face. Of course he would be punished, but he'd take it like it never bothered him. This went on for a week. Oh, I tell you, Eugene, he was full of threats, and the look he gave the guards...it was like he wanted to kill them, but of course, he couldn't.

"By the second week he was a beaten man. He still refused to answer questions, and when he could muster up the strength, he'd spit at me; but he was beaten, and he knew it. Once he began cooperating, the punishment would cease. He'd get regular meals and water, and eventually he was cured."

Eugene tried to muster the strength to speak. "What am I being treated for?"

Sistrunk looked surprised, and then his mien turned to understanding. His crooked smile was back. "You don't fit in, Eugene. Your thoughts are scattered. You don't understand the world around you. You think life is unfair; hostile. You are afraid of your government. You don't believe the Constitution works anymore. You think the courts are against you. You think there are malevolent—"

"No, that's not it—"

"DON'T TALK BACK TO ME."

Hurd struck him in the face with an open hand, and then he grabbed the hard club, whacking him in the mid-section again. "You don't criticize the doctor—understand, shithead?"

All Eugene could utter was a pathetic, "I'm sorry, doctor."

"That's all right, Eugene. I understand. You understand too, don't you Mr. Hurd?"

"Yes, doctor. Eugene's just like the rest of them when they first get here: angry, resentful, and snotty."

“Now that we understand each other better, let’s go on with Professor Harold Zinney. Shall we begin with how you met him?”

“Please doctor, my stomach hurts a lot. I think I might have a broken rib.”

Sistrunk motioned for the nurse, who was sitting at the utility table. She opened up the display cabinet and reached in for a bottle of something. She gave Eugene what appeared to be aspirin with a glass of water. Then he repeated his question to Eugene.

Eugene began answering all the doctor’s questions, wincing through the pain, and then asked for some water. Hurd didn’t take the straps off, but squirted bottled water in Eugene’s mouth. He spit it up, and Hurd and the doctor began laughing.

“Eugene,” Hurd said, “you told me you were thirsty, but look, Doc—he just spits it all out. Well, I guess you weren’t so thirsty, after all.”

Hurd removed the bottle, but Eugene protested. “Please! It’s too much. Please take the straps off me.”

“If I let you out of your chair, will you promise to behave yourself, Eugene?” the doctor said.

“Yes, I promise, doctor.”

Eugene was released and taken to the utility table, where he was told to sit down. A few minutes later, the nurse brought him some soup and bottled water. Eugene drank down the water at once and asked for more. Then he ate the soup. It was mostly chicken broth; not very filling.

After ten minutes Eugene was brought back to his chair. Hurd started to strap him in, but Sistrunk stopped him.

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Hurd.”

The nurse brought him another bottle of water and handed it to Eugene, who continued to quench his enormous thirst.

The interrogation continued but Eugene seemed to drift in and out of consciousness. He couldn’t concentrate well, and when he didn’t answer right away Hurd would hit him again. Eugene found himself gibbering away so as to avoid the punishment.

Eugene prattled on until he noticed there was no one around. He looked up at the clock. It was half past eight. He figured he must have passed out because the last time he noticed the time it was about 6:30. Eugene stopped talking, and the next time he looked at the clock it was 11:45. He also

noticed he was strapped to the chair again. He wasn't sure for how long, but he realized he must have passed out again.

Doctor Sistrunk came back and called for Hurd. The guard came back down the steps and resumed his position next to Eugene. Then the recorder, or whatever he was, resumed his position to the right of him.

"Now, Eugene, please try to stay awake."

"Okay, doctor."

The interrogation continued, as did the occasional beatings. Eugene then felt the sting of a needle, and saw the nurse just finishing an inoculation. Eugene looked at the clock. It was now a little after three. Eugene didn't know if it was morning or afternoon.

"The nurse gave you some ephedrine. It will help you stay awake and focus on my questions."

"Please, doctor. I don't want to cause trouble, but how much longer will this go on?"

"It will go on for as long as it takes, Mr. Sulke," the doctor said.

At 4:30 Doctor Sistrunk concluded this phase of the interrogation. "Well done, Eugene. You can get some rest now."

Hurd released the straps and escorted Eugene into the little room he wondered about. It was dark and had no furniture. It appeared to be an empty utility closet, about four by five, with only a cement floor to sleep on. Eugene was locked in.

There wasn't enough room to fully lie in it. His pants were wet with urine, and he drifted in and out of consciousness. When awake, he reflected on all that happened. *What's going on? I remembered being home when the doorbell rang. It was Dennis and Teresa. Teresa was holding a plate of brownies, and Dennis had a case of beer. If I wasn't going to go to them, they'd invite themselves over to my house.*

I was sitting on the couch and drinking some of the beer when I felt tired. That was it until I woke up strapped to that chair. They kidnapped me! They kidnapped me! I don't understand. They're my friends. Was Cassandra right, after all? Am I fully in that sling she talked about? Why? Why is this happening to me? What do they want me to do? Treated for what? What is this place? Then he fell asleep.



Eugene slept fitfully in his lifeless room until the overhead light came on. It was harsh and brutal, like the entire room. Hurd opened the door and ordered his prisoner out. Eugene moved slowly. His back and stomach hurt, and his left arm was asleep. His face was a mixture of red, black, and blue. Pus formed around his left eye.

“Come on, come on, Sulke. The doctor doesn’t have all day.”

Hurd reached in and grabbed Eugene, who was still semi-lying on the cold cement floor. He yanked him to his feet, and dragged him to the chair. The chair waited for him, baring its ferocity, yawning out to reach him, and capturing the scared man in its infernal embrace.

“Man, you stink,” Hurd said. “What’d you do, piss yourself?”

“Good morning, Eugene,” Sistrunk said. “I trust you slept well.”

“Oh, like a baby. That cement floor was so comfortable, doc. How’d you do it?”

Hurd reached for the soft truncheon and hit Gene over the head with it. “Is this any way to talk to the doctor, Sulke?” he said to him, nose to nose.

Eugene wasn’t tied down, so he pushed Hurd back and stood up to confront Dr. Sistrunk. “How am I supposed to sleep in that cage?” His voice was harsh and angry.

Hurd was about to clobber him again, but Sistrunk motioned for Hurd to leave him alone. He stared at Eugene again with that crooked absurdist smile. “Progress and comfort go hand in hand.”

He turned to Hurd. “Why don’t you have Alisha bring Eugene some breakfast?”

“Yes, doctor.” Hurd motioned to the nurse who was sitting at the utility table.

“Now, Eugene, why don’t you sit over at the table? I think we have some nice bacon and eggs for you; maybe a little orange juice as well. You like that, don’t you?”

Hurd grabbed his arm by the shoulder and led him to the table. Eugene was quieted, but his expression reflected anger. He flashed a look of fury at Hurd. As Eugene sat down and waited for his breakfast he continued to

stare at Hurd; a steely look, filled with venom. Hurd paid no attention to him; standing at parade rest and facing away from him.

Alisha brought Eugene his breakfast, but Eugene continued to stare at Hurd. The smell of bacon and eggs to a desperately hungry man was enough to soften his countenance, however, as he now dove into his breakfast. No sooner finished, Hurd brought him back to the interrogation chair. He wasn't strapped down, and the interrogation continued as the questions turned to his wife.

"When did you meet her?"

"How did you meet?"

"What are her parents like?"

Then the questions turned to his parents and brother.

"What do they believe in?"

"How do you get along with your brother?"

"Do you argue?"

Eugene's answers were short, crisp, and curt. His voice was raw and angry, but controlled. The dour man pecked away at his machine.

The nurse tended to Eugene's face while the staccato questions were fired, and then she put an ointment over the discoloration. Hour after hour, the doc fired away his relentless questions until Eugene lost consciousness. When he awoke, Sistrunk resumed the interrogation.

"What's your boss like?"

"Tell me about your co-workers."

"What do they believe in?"

"How well do you get along with them?"

"Who are your friends?"

"What are they like?"

"How did you come to know them?"

"What do they believe in?"

"What do you argue about?"

Eugene continued to answer the questions directly, offering only enough information to satisfy Sistrunk. Sick and tired of the inexorable, prying questions, he finally mustered up the nerve to ask the doctor a question.

"Excuse me, doctor, but why do you want to know all this?"

Hurd was about to clobber him again, but Sistrunk gestured to him, and Hurd maintained his position.

"These questions are necessary in helping you with your treatment."

“What treatment?”

“You will know when it starts.”

“When can I go home?”

“When you are cured, Eugene,” Sistrunk said, although his voice betrayed a frustration with the questions.

Hour after hour, the questions spurted out, and hour after hour, the old man typed away. Punctuated by brief breaks when he’d be given water and a brief meal, the questions were relentless, detailed, and forced Eugene to search his memory for the answers. Sistrunk never permitted vague answers, forcing Eugene to dig for the facts, or make them up, if necessary. When he’d start to nod off, Alisha would give him another shot of ephedrine.

Without realizing it, Eugene found himself in the closet again. He was dazed, confused, and in great pain. Rage gathered within him as he reached down within himself, and he let out a scream that could wake the dead.

CHAPTER II

OPERATION RESCUE

“C had, Wrenn here.”

“What do you got for me?” Armstrong asked.

Ray brought Chad Armstrong and his sharpshooters in to rescue Eugene from that terrible place. He sent one of his men to Hell House to try and determine if Eugene was there and stake out the place. Armstrong was an ex-Blue, tall and muscular, with blonde short-cropped hair and blue eyes. He was also smart and a first-rate military planner. Ray depended on him and his men to get Eugene out of Hell House.

“I’m here at the House. Plenty of security—hidden; camouflaged.”

“Be careful.”

“Think I’ll go for a lit—”

There was a noise. Armstrong could hear a muffled noise at a distance.

“Wrenn! Are you there?”

There was no answer.

“Wrenn, goddamn it, don’t fuck with me.”

“Who the fuck are you?” a mysterious voice on the phone said. Armstrong hung up. He thought a moment, and then called another team member.

“Foote, I lost Wrenn. I think he’s been captured. Get down to Hell House and see if you can find him. Take Paulie with you. Let me know what’s going on.”

Foote went down to Hell House and found Wrenn’s car, but not Wrenn. There was the look of a struggle. Blood was in the car, and drops trailed out of it. It was still fresh.

“I can’t believe he could be ambushed,” Paulie said. “He’s usually doing the ambushing.”

Foote was busy staring at the House. He seemed to be in a trance. “Foote, what about Wrenn?”

Foote didn't answer. Terry Foote was a tall stoic soldier who didn't go in for trivialities. He doggedly stuck to the matter at hand as he looked left of the house, right of the house; at one window, and then at another.

"This place is crawling with security," Foote finally responded.

"I don't see anything."

Foote turned around and stared across the street. He looked like he was taking a panoramic picture of the neighborhood. He just moved with super slow motion from left to right, and then right to left.

Paulie looked at the same thing Foote was looking at, and furrowed his brow. "I don't see anything."

Foote paid no attention to Paulie at first, as he completed his search. Finally, he turned to him. "There are at least a dozen security people watching us."

Then he turned toward the truck nearby. "Come on out of there, Wrenn."

Wrenn came crawling out from under the chassis with a big grin on his face. An impish character that too often masqueraded his inner toughness, Paulie just stared at him, and then at Foote. "I was wondering how long it'd take you to notice me."

"And what about all these security people?" Paulie asked.

"It's a wonder you always hit your target when you can't even see anything," Foote said. Paulie made a face.

Wrenn laughed. "See that tree to the left of the house?"

Paulie searched for a minute. "I see two trees."

"The one closest to the house," Wrenn said.

"Okay, so?"

"Jeez, Paulie," Foote said. "Look about two-thirds of the way up on the right side of the tree."

"I think I see something moving, but I'm not sure."

"There's a guy in that tree. He's camouflaged, but you can see a slight change of color where he is," Wrenn said.

"Look at the roof," Foote said. "Do you see a couple of grey rectangular objects—one each on the left and right sides?"

Paulie stared at it. "Sure. You aren't going to tell me those are men?"

Wrenn just gave Paulie a funny look. Wrenn was smaller than Foote, with a wiry frame and an infectious smile. "You see, we're trained to find

the bad guy's hiding places. That's the secret. You anticipate where the hiding places are, and you look for the men—"

"And what to see," Foote said. "Look at the windows of the house. They're good for daytime spying. The daylight reflects off the window so you can't see inside, but look closely at the windows. If someone is there you can spot a slight shadow moving."

"And don't look directly at it," Wrenn said. "You see more with your peripheral vision."

"I see more? How?"

"It's not clarity that's always important—it's motion," Foote said. "You can see motion more clearly out of the corner of your eye than when you're looking straight at something. If you look straight at the window, you can't see anything. Look to the left or the right of it, and, if someone is there, you can detect their motion."

"That's how we saw the camouflaged men," Wrenn said. "A slight motion—a move of the hand, the head, anything, and that's when you know they're there."

"Okay, I guess I understand, but what I don't get is how did you know Wrenn was under that truck?"

"I just followed the blood trail. What I don't know are the details. Right, Jack?"

Wrenn was hysterical with laughter. He was the jokester of the group. "You should have seen me in action. It was a thing of beauty. I tell yah, boys. It was—"

"Cut the shit, Wrenn. How did you get ambushed anyway?"

"I was on the phone. I can't concentrate when I'm on the phone. I had the driver side window down so I could see better. That's where the guy ambushed me. He hid in my blind spot, and then came through the open window with a rope. He had it around my neck before I could react. I realized I was losing consciousness, so I went limp."

"Wrenn can look like a dead man better than any dead man I've seen," Foote said.

"Believe it, boy—dead eye and all, with just the right grunting. It fooled ole soldier boy. He yanked me out of the car and got his dig in with Chad. Then I slit his throat. Look at this car! Do you know how hard it is to clean that blood? It's going to take hours."

"Where is the body?" Paulie asked.

“With me, under the truck.”

“One thing I still don’t understand, you guys, is...well, aren’t we in danger standing out here talking?”

“Look,” Foote said, “this is a public street. They can’t just shoot us, and they don’t know who we are. The guards are trained to watch, and to make sure no one gets too nosy.”

“But Wrenn got ambushed.”

“I was alone, and got distracted,” Wrenn said.

“Nevertheless, Paulie has a point. We should get out of here before someone starts questioning us,” Foote said.



Armstrong, Ray, Cassandra, Sean, Jimmy the Fox, Foote, and Wrenn were in a rented room near Hell House, studying a map of the house and neighborhood. It gave them a good idea where all the security was, but they didn’t know anything about what was going on inside Hell House; nor could they even be sure this was where they were keeping Eugene.

“We need to get inside the house,” Chad said.

“How are we going to do that with all the security?” Cassandra asked.

“Hon, he means a bug or camera,” Ray said. Cassandra made a face.

“It’s our eyes and ears,” Chad said, smiling.

“But we won’t be able to get a camera in there,” Wrenn said.

“Going to be a bitch just getting a bug in there,” Foote said.

Then Armstrong had an idea. “We can’t just waltz in there and plant a microphone. We can’t get them to accept a package with a built in listening device. They’re clearly not going to accept unknown packages. That leaves only one other option—plant a bug in a back window. My guess is that’s where the action is going to be.”

“You’re going to need a high amplification device with very large signal to noise,” the Fox said.

“What do you have in mind?” Ray asked.

“Old NSA super tiny mic; looks like a small insect; great gain; superb s/n; Model AN FQR1361. I can get it for around two grand.”

“That’s a lot of money, Ray,” Armstrong said.

“We have the money,” Cassandra said.

Ray looked at her askance.

“Please, Ray. We have the money, and it’s Gene in there. If I didn’t....” Her voice trailed off and she looked down.

Ray looked over to Armstrong. “We have the money.”

“Okay, let’s say we have the bug. Now, how do we get it on the window?”

They all studied the map. Some ideas were workable, but carried risks too great for Chad Armstrong. Other ideas wouldn’t work at all. They studied all night and into the wee hours of the morning, when Foote seemed to have the best idea.

“Look, here,” he said. “This is their weakest point. There!” pointing to the side of the house. “The two guys in the back can’t see there. The guy in the tree on the other side of the house is blocked from view. The guys on the other side of the street can only see the back end of the yard. That leaves only the guy in the other tree. We could shoot him with a high-powered rifle far enough away so as to not be heard; hop the fence to the back side window; plant the bug, and high-tail it out of there.”

“What if there is another guard on the ground?” Cassandra asked. “We need to know.”

“That’s a problem,” Armstrong said. “We can only do this once. If we’re found out, that’ll be the end of us; and for your friend.” Armstrong was staring at Ray and Cassandra. “I think the risk is too great. If we’re discovered putting the bug on the window, and assuming we can still get out, they’ll take off the bug, put extra security around the back; or worse, move Eugene—assuming he’s in there—somewhere else.”

“We have another problem too,” Wrenn said. “If we plant the bug without them seeing us, but they discover it later—”

“Which they will,” Ray said.

“Then they’ll redouble the security anyway,” answered Wrenn.

“You’re both right,” Armstrong admitted. “Furthermore, when they discover the dead guy in the tree, they’ll know something is up. I believe we’re going to have to force our way in; take out all the guards, and break in. Yet we still have to do it quickly or the whole goddamn brigade of ‘em will be down on us.”

“Wait a minute!” Jimmy the Fox said. “I just thought of something. Holy Christ, it just might work.”

The others just looked at him, waiting to hear the Fox’s big idea.

“When I put the tracker on Dennis’s truck the other night I noticed the cap he wears sitting in the passenger seat. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but when you guys talked about having to put a bug on the window because—”

“Just tell us your idea,” Armstrong said.

“Oh, sorry. What if we put a bug in his cap? He must go in there because he’s got all that info that Daniel found.”

“It would be a good idea, except that he only went there once,” Ray said. “We’ve been tracking him since you put the tracker on, and apparently he gets information relayed to him by phone to his office.” The men groaned.

“Furthermore, how soon would it be before the bug was discovered?” Foote repeated .

They discussed the original idea of forced entry. Armstrong said it was the only viable way in. The others nodded in agreement.

“Let’s get some sleep and develop a plan in the morning,” Chad said.

The next morning the only discussion that took place was that any operation was likely to produce casualties, and with so many unknowns Armstrong was ready to cancel everything.

The team was feeling down when Ray came rushing into the room, grinning. “I just heard from Daniel. He found all the details about Hell House: security configurations, a clinic, and confirmation that Eugene is in there. They set up the operations in the basement. That’s where they’re working on Eugene. They call it Operation Breakdown. The plans and maps are printing out now.”

“Well,” Armstrong said, “that certainly changes things. Let’s get some chow and tackle this bad boy. We’ll call it ‘Operation Rescue’.”



Eugene was in the terrible closet. Sleep would come in waves, and the ephedrine, still in his system, made sleep difficult. He reeked of urine and feces, and ached all over as he contemplated his dilemma. *I’m in Fernando’s camp. They won’t break me. I won’t let them. Maybe I could fool them into thinking they had so they’d let me go. Could it work?*

The door opened and Hurd dragged him out. The light was bright, and Eugene had to cover his eyes before coming out. Eugene was escorted by Hurd and the upstairs guard to the gurney.

They carried him onto it, and he helplessly watched the guards strap him down. Dr. Frankenstein (Eugene's name for Sistrunk) came over to him, talking in that saccharine way; so eerie, yet cruel.

"You've done very well, Eugene; so well that we can now proceed to the next step in your cure." He gave Eugene an injection that made him feel really queer. He was sort of woozy, but he didn't feel like he'd lose consciousness.

Then Dr. Sistrunk disappeared and came from the back room a few minutes later with a helmet that had electrodes on it.

"What is this for?" Eugene asked; not sure if he expected an answer or a swat.

"It is to help you, young man."

An assistant he hadn't seen before placed the helmet securely on Eugene's head, and then plugged it into a control panel. Then he flipped a switch, and some lights came on. Eugene felt a jolt of electricity in his head, and for a second, thought they were giving him some sort of shock therapy. He made a face and grunted, and then realized this electrical feeling was too mild to be shock therapy.

"Oh, you make such a fuss, Eugene. I'll turn down the voltage a little if you are too uncomfortable." Dr. Sistrunk did so, and Eugene felt a little better, but he could hear an irritating hum, and he felt a muffled feeling like he just swallowed a whole bottle of aspirin.

Then the lab assistant went into the back room and came back with goggles in his hand. He put them on Eugene, fully covering his eyes. At first, he saw nothing; just blackness. Then, there was a kaleidoscope of color swirling around. The colors were constantly changing.

"Describe the colors you see to me," Sistrunk said.

"I see a lot of blues, and browns, and reds, and greens."

"Do the colors appear dark or light?"

"Slightly on the dark side, I think." The doctor flipped another switch and adjusted a dial.

"Now, Eugene, I'm going to ask you a few questions that you should have no trouble answering. It is important that you give me a truthful

answer, and not the answer you may think I want to hear. So long as you do this, Eugene, you will not be punished. Do you understand?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Good, good. Now here is the first question: Are you on a table?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to go home?"

"Yes."

"Do the colors you are looking at appear brighter or darker than they were?"

"Brighter."

"Good, excellent. You're doing just fine now. Now, tell me your true feelings about Professor Herald Zinney."

"He's a terrific person."

"What makes him so terrific, Eugene?"

"He teaches that one should always seek truth."

"Is there something more?"

"He says seeking truth is noble, and finding it is dangerous."

"How so?"

"Because truth is something you can only approach; get closer to, but is always just out of reach."

"So, he doesn't believe in any absolute truths?"

"No, he doesn't."

"You mean he doesn't believe one plus one equals two?"

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean philosophical truths."

"So he does believe in mathematical certainties."

"Yes. At least, I believe so."

"So, you're uncertain?"

"I don't know...I feel funny...."

"You are confused, are you not?"

"I...I'm not sure. I feel funny."

"What are the colors doing now? Are they brighter or darker?"

"About the same."

"Good, excellent. We're making good progress today. Now, suppose I say that one can't believe in certainty and uncertainty at the same time. Does this make sense to you?"

"Yes."

“Good. I have no doubt it would make sense to any right-thinking man. Would you agree?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Good, good. Now, in the case of Harold Zinney—he says on the one hand there are no absolute truths; on the other hand, there are absolute truths, as you’ve already admitted. Are we in agreement here?”

“I feel bad, doctor...I just don’t feel clear about this.”

“Did you understand what I just asked, Eugene?”

“I...I’m not sure.”

“You aren’t sure because you’re fighting me. Your mind knows that Zinney is a liar, but you can’t come to terms with it. Did you notice your brain spectrum got darker when you began fighting me?”

“Yes, doctor. I’m trying to be truthful.”

“Not hard enough, Eugene. Now tell me the truth. How can he say you can’t discover truth except when you have to admit you can? If there are no truths, then there are no mathematical certainties either. Am I correct?”

“Yes, you are correct.”

Dr. Sistrunk frowned.

“Do you now believe Professor Zinney is a fraud?”

“Yes,” Eugene said.

Dr. Sistrunk frowned again, and then he glanced over to the assistant.

“Do you believe you’re better now?”

“Yes. I’m much better. You opened my eyes.”

Dr. Sistrunk shut the machine off, and then took off the goggles and helmet. He was visibly upset now.

“Were the colors dark or light, Mr. Sulke?”

“I...I don’t remember.”

Sistrunk motioned to Hurd. “You are a liar, Mr. Sulke, and you know very well those colors nearly went black. Liars are punished, Mr. Sulke.” Turning to Hurd, “Throw him back in his closet.”

As Hurd unstrapped him and began leading him to the closet, Sistrunk called over to him. “I had prepared a nice meal for you. Guess I’ll eat it myself.”



Eugene was in the closet for a few hours. He was angry and bitter. *What do they want? What do they expect from me? Resisting them got me slapped and punched, but telling them what they wanted to hear got me the same treatment. I just don't understand. What I must focus on is getting out of here. I can't run when they unstrap me, but what if I can get the gun away from Hurd? With a gun I can force my way out of here to freedom; but how am I going to do that? Hurd keeps it holstered, and the odds that I can distract him while lifting the gun are pretty slim. It will certainly get me beaten again.*

Perhaps, if I can force him to turn over the gun to me...yeah, that's it. If I can get one of those scalpels out of the cabinet...but what if it's locked? I don't actually know. If I could only get something I can use as a weapon... Frankenstein looks easy to grab hold of. I could threaten to kill him; force Hurd and the upstairs guy to turn over their guns to me. It could work. I'll have to be more focused on what Hurd and the doctor do all the time: check for weaknesses, get to know their patterns. I'd also have to gain their confidence; demonstrate to them that I could be trusted. It may take a while, but I know I could hold out, especially if I could keep from being beaten.

Suddenly the overhead light came on, and Hurd came to get him. He responded with a little more alacrity this time so Hurd wouldn't feel the need to drag him to the chair or gurney or whatever that thing was called. Nevertheless, he secured him to the hideous chair by its straps. Then Hurd strapped his feet in too.

"Alisha," Sistrunk said. "Get our sheers and shaver, and cut off Sulke's hair."

She fetched them from the bottom shelf of the cabinet. Eugene noticed she didn't need a key to open it. He tried to stay focused on what everyone was doing. Hurd was to the left of him, at parade rest; the doctor went in the other room; and Alisha was playing her barber role. Once this was finished she put the sheers back in the cabinet. She didn't lock it, and then she went into the other room. Eugene could hear her talking with the doctor, and then Sistrunk came out with the dreaded helmet, but not the goggles. Alisha put the helmet on him, but this time it was hooked up to a different machine; a box he never saw before. A cable connected between the box and the opened laptop.

"Are you familiar with an fMRI, Mr. Sulke?" said Sistrunk.

Eugene indicated so.

“This is a bit more advanced. With this scan we can decipher just how your brain sorts information. Once completed, we can begin curing you.”

The doctor turned the machine on, and Eugene could see some lights flicker and come on. There was a soft humming noise, and Eugene felt a slight tingling sensation from under the helmet. It didn’t hurt, and after a few minutes he barely noticed it.

“This will tell us a lot about how your mind works. Now, I’m going to ask you a few questions, and I want you to both say and think about the answer. You must keep thinking about the answer until I ask you another question. Do you understand?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Don’t try to fight me because I’ll know, and it will only prolong your treatment.”

“I understand.”

“How much is ten times ten?”

“100.”

“Good! Now picture that equation in your mind.”

Sistrunk asked about a dozen more math questions, progressively harder to solve. By the last question Eugene was unsure of the answer, and waited a couple of minutes before providing the wrong answer.

The questions now turned to social issues. “Mr. Sulke, what is your favorite thing to do outside of work?”

Eugene thought about the answer. “I like to watch a little TV sometimes; other times I like to read; maybe listen to a little music.”

After reminding Eugene to keep that thought in his head, the doctor asked several more questions like it. Following these were questions about his boss, co-workers, and casual friends; then of family and relatives.

Sistrunk then began asking questions he didn’t know the answers to—questions about work. “I want to know how your brain handles logic,” Sistrunk said.

The grilling went on for hours, and then stopped. The helmet was taken off, and his straps were released. He was given an opportunity to stretch, and then get something to eat. Hurd stayed close to him at all times, so there was no opportunity to steal a scalpel from the cabinet, and initiate his escape. He realized that it may be several more days before he could create the trust that he could use to carry out his plan.

Eugene had no breakfast, so he was given an extra-large meal, and was allowed about a half hour to consume it. He was brought back to the interrogation chair, and strapped in it—feet and arms. Sistrunk spent the whole time at the computer desk printing something out, and then studying the results.

Eugene heard footsteps coming down the steps again, and then Sistrunk spoke up.

“Ahh, Peter, good, good; right on time.” A man Eugene saw at the metal table or gurney earlier, entered. He was more of a boy than a man; not older than twenty. He looked like he might be a soldier because of his lean and muscular build. He marched right over to the desk the stenographer used—he was gone now. Sistrunk came over and shook his hand, and then showed him something. “Peter, here is his chart.”

Peter studied it a while, and then carried it over to Eugene. Alisha then came from the back room carrying a marker. She handed it to Peter, who began drawing on Eugene’s naked scalp.

Eugene flinched. “What are you doing?”

“Please don’t move a muscle,” Peter said. “This is very sensitive work. I am attempting to sketch all the different parts of your brain on your head.”

The drawing went on for about an hour. Eugene could feel the marking pen all over his scalp. Peter would draw some, and then stop to examine the paper; then he would continue. The act of drawing on Eugene’s head caused him to flinch repeatedly, always drawing a rebuke.

“Please stop moving around,” Peter said.

“Sorry.”

“Hold still,” Hurd said.

“I’m trying.”

“Eugene, if you flinch again I will have to put you in a head restraint,” Sistrunk said, “and I promise you it will be most uncomfortable.”

When Peter finished, Sistrunk reached into the cabinet—still unlocked—and pulled out the scary tubular thing with the wires. The tube was about the size of a cigar. Sistrunk undid the wiring and hooked it to the computer. Peter attached the object to something above Eugene, and then sat down behind the desk, operating the laptop. He periodically glanced at the monitor that was suspended from the ceiling, and then pushed some more buttons.

Sistrunk gave Eugene an evil smile as he reached up to the pointy object and started to lower it over Eugene's skull. "This is the probare cerebrum or brain probe. It is used to begin your treatment, Eugene."

Eugene felt his pulse quicken as he arched his head and glared at the strange object.

"Everything up until now was prep work for your treatment. It was important to understand how your mind works—you think too much about things that don't really matter, Eugene." He stopped to observe him; and then flashed his evil smile. "You see the pointy side of the probare cerebrum?"

Eugene looked up and gulped. "This is the acus," pointing to the needle. "It uses an electromagnetic charge that can sever some synaptic nerve transmissions, and create new ones. I'm afraid it produces an irritating sensation.

"This wire mesh links the probe to a computer on the desk, and creates a mental image of your brain on the monitor over there. Shall we begin?"

Eugene was scared, but he tried not to show it.

"There is some discomfort when we begin the treatment. It may feel like I'm penetrating the skull, but the acus doesn't actually touch the skin."

Sistrunk, still smiling, grabbed Eugene's head, pushing it level. Then Alisha put a head restraint over Eugene and attached it to the chair. Eugene couldn't move his head.

Sistrunk now lowered the acus just above the skull, and pushed a button on the probe. It made a humming noise and a jabbing feeling as if it were going right through his cranium. "Please doctor, that hurts."

Then Sistrunk began wiggling it, and occasionally dragging it across his scalp. The humming noise changed pitch as Sistrunk dragged it across his cranium. At once, Eugene felt a vicious headache. He felt like there was a cat inside his head trying to scratch his way out. He let out a high-pitched scream, and Frankenstein raised the probe.

"Oh, you make such a fuss; such a racket." He then repeated the procedure. The headache came back, worse than before. Again, Eugene screamed. The session seemed to last several minutes. When it was over Eugene thought his head was going to explode.

"That wasn't too bad now, was it?" Eugene hurt so much he couldn't open his mouth.

“I understand, Eugene. Many people clench their jaws so hard during the procedure they find it difficult to open them. I assure you, Eugene, the pain is only in your mind. Ready for the next application?”

Alisha put a piece of rubber in Eugene’s mouth while Peter, operating the controls, made a slight change of one of the dials.

Gene was probed again. The pain was overwhelming. He made a muffled scream as tears streamed from his eyes. He began evacuating his bowels. He wanted to faint, but Alisha gave him an injection that kept him conscious. Throughout the procedure, Eugene shook violently and his eyes widened.

“That was a good one, Mr. Sulke. One more and I think we’ll finally start making progress.” Peter adjusted some controls again.

Once again, the probe was applied to the middle of his skull. This time the acus seemed to bore right through his head. Eugene let out a scream far worse than before. He felt his head exploding, but the doctor just smiled.

When he finished, the guard released Eugene; but when freed, Eugene came out swinging. He threw a haymaker at Hurd’s head. Hurd grabbed his head and ears, but Eugene just threw himself at him, screaming profusely. Hurd yelled for the other guard. Hurd tried to wrestle Eugene to the chair, but Eugene crouched down. Hurd then began beating him over the head, but Eugene leaped up and toward him, throwing punches with both fists. Finally, the other guard grabbed Eugene by the legs, and with Hurd holding his arms, they carried him to the gurney and strapped him on it. Then Hurd beat him with the soft truncheon.

Peter put the helmet and goggles back on him while Alisha gave him an injection that seemed to calm him down. After the helmet was reattached to the other device Hurd began to taunt him.

“You’re a real smart ass, aren’t you? Thought you could take me, didn’t you? Well, you aren’t so smart now, are you?” Hurd flashed a menacing look at Eugene. “You better start cooperating, smart ass! You haven’t experienced real punishment yet.”

“FUCK YOU!” Eugene yelled, as he spat at Hurd.

“Stop this nonsense, Mr. Sulke,” Sistrunk said.

“Resume your position, Mr. Hurd,” Sistrunk said with a disapproving look. Hurd went to parade rest, but he was still within striking distance of Eugene. Sistrunk turned his attention to his “patient”.

“Now, if one plus one is two, is that not an absolute truth?”

“FUCK YOU!”

“ANSWER THE FUCKING QUESTION,” Hurd demanded.

Alisha gave him another injection, and then Sistrunk repeated the question.

“Yes, you asshole.”

Hurd slapped him again.

“So there are absolute truths.”

Gene was silent.

“MR. SULKE, YOU MUST ANSWER THE QUESTION.”

Gene spat at the doctor, and got slapped two more times.



Chad Armstrong had spent much of the morning going over the plans Daniel cracked from the Squad’s private web site.

“What do ya think?” Ray said.

Chad looked worried. “Can we really be sure of the schedule?”

“What d’ya mean?”

“Is it a set schedule, or approximated? Does it stay the same from day-to-day or does it change? I don’t want to assume it stays the same. Assumptions get you killed.”

“I preach that myself. Suppose we wait and see if anything changes.”

“Good idea, Ray. All the same though, I want a plan with built-in flexibility in case their schedule does change.”

He called the rest of the team in and summarized what he’d found out, and what worried him. “We need a plan based on what we know, and still allow us to seamlessly change it if circumstances change. Study the plans and let me know your ideas.”

The men spent hours on a plan, but nothing concrete emerged.

“I think we should wait until tomorrow to see if anything changes,” Foote said. “Me and Wrenn would be able to tell.”

“I know, Terry. Ray and I discussed this. I suppose that’s what we’ll have to do.”

The phone rang. It was one of Armstrong’s men. “Yeah, Jimmy.”

“Sir, I heard a shriek from the basement. It was somewhat faint, but it was clearly a scream of terror.”

“Eugene,” Armstrong said out loud. The others just looked at him. “Understood,” Armstrong said as he hung up. “There’s no question now, boys—Eugene’s in a bad way. It’s tonight or never. I need a detailed plan now.”

It was early nightfall when the team came up with a plan. They would assume the schedule would hold, but the moment it changed, the attack would be called off. Spotters would be used to determine if anything changed. Armstrong would give the go or no go. The assault would be coordinated to begin at 2:33 a.m. Four vans would be positioned for the assault and rescue. All six of Armstrong’s sharpshooters would be used for the assault, including Sean, Ray, and Cass.

Armstrong’s men would take various routes to the House so as not to attract suspicion. Coordination of the assault and rescue would be by mobile phone, using an encrypted voice command that each member of the team would have. Low volume silence was to be in effect the moment the team was near the House. There would be no unnecessary talking, and when necessary, talking would be at a whisper. There would be no time to practice. Each man had an assignment, and each knew how to carry it out. There could be no mistakes. They had one chance to do the job right.

1:30—guard change.

1:45—the new guards were in place and the old guards were gone.

2:00—all was quiet.

2:15—Spotters made a final check.



Eugene was being badgered relentlessly now. “If one plus one equals two, and if this is an absolute truth, then how can there be no absolute truths?”

“Well I guess I wouldn’t know.” Hurd kept beating him for each insolent answer Eugene gave, and he was barely conscious now.

“YES YOU DO! YOU KNOW THERE ARE ABSOLUTE TRUTHS. YOU KNOW ZINNEY IS A LIAR!”

Eugene tried to muster whatever energy he had left to spit at Frankenstein.

“ANSWER THE FUCKING QUESTION,” Hurd screamed.

“Fuck you!” Eugene said in a low grumbling voice.

“We’ll have to increase the volume of the probe,” Sistrunk said to Peter. Then, turning to Eugene, “You still have doubts. You want to hold on to your belief in this radical. He tells you things that don’t make sense. Right, Mr. Sulke?”

Eugene glared at him. By this time he was bleeding from the nose and upper lip. His face was a gory mixture of black, blue, red and purple. His left eye was closed.

“You don’t believe I’m right. Your colors are still dark. You are still hanging on to an outrageous belief. You keep lying to yourself, to your family, to me. You are a philosophical mongrel. Aren’t you, Mr. Sulke?”

“Fuck you!” Eugene was crying now, and his throat was hoarse.

Suddenly, gunfire was heard.

“We’re under attack,” the upstairs guard shouted.

“Quick,” yelled Sistrunk to Hurd. “Get him in the closet.”

Shots were fired simultaneously at 2:33. Five guards were taken out immediately. The side yard guard responded to the shooting, and he was shot. Six guards down. The initial volley went through the windows, where the window guards were scheduled to be. Their fates were unknown.

The sharpshooters took out two more guards, once their new position became known. There were eight guards down, leaving the four inside. Suddenly, a howitzer shell blasted through the front door. Ray and Cassandra rushed in taking out two guards—one wounded from the initial volley.

While this was going on, Armstrong, Foote, Wrenn, and Sean came over the back fence. Foote and Wrenn carried a tall ladder. The ladder was set up against the house, and Sean climbed to the roof.

As the three rushed inside through the back door, Sean went into action immediately. A fresh squadron came to the rescue. Sean radioed their position to Paulie. Together they took out one of them, forcing the other two to take cover.

Foote and Wrenn entered the back of the house and shot the two guards there, and then shot the upstairs guard at the top of the basement steps. Then they went down into the basement, Wrenn in the lead. Hurd shot at him and winged him; Wrenn letting out a cry. Foote then shot Hurd, and checked on his buddy. Wrenn assured him he was all right, and they descended the stairs.

There was no sign of Eugene. Peter and Alisha had escaped, but Wrenn and Foote caught Sistrunk before he could follow them.

“Where is Eugene Sulke?” Foote demanded.

Sistrunk was silent while Wrenn perused the clinic. He saw the medical shelves, opened them up and grabbed something that looked like a painkiller and some bandages.

“Where is Sulke?” Foote repeated.

Sistrunk didn’t move, and Foote grabbed him. “You tell me where he is or I’ll start cutting off your fingers one by one.”

There was yelling from the closet.

Wrenn ran over there and yelled for Eugene. “In here,” came the muffled reply. Wrenn tried to open the door, but it was locked.

“Where is the key?” Foote said, staring at Sistrunk with flared nostrils.

“Hurry up, you guys,” Armstrong shouted from upstairs.

“Where is the key?” Foote said a little louder. When the doctor hesitated, Foote took out his knife.

“A doctor without fingers is pretty useless.” Foote pointed to the locked door.

Sistrunk just flashed his evil smile. “I look forward to seeing you in that chair over there.” Foote slugged him, and Sistrunk went down. Then Foote, with a murderous look on his face, went for Sistrunk. One look at that knife was all Frankenstein needed for motivation.

“Mr. Hurd has the key.” He went over to his body and fished the key from his pocket, eyeing the holstered gun the whole time.

Sistrunk showed Foote the key and then opened the closet. They saw a semi-conscious, emaciated, and severely beaten man they assumed to be Eugene Sulke. The place reeked of crap and piss.

Foote and Wrenn got him out of there, and they pushed him up the stairs to the main floor.

“Are you Eugene Sulke?” Armstrong said. He nodded he was.

Ray and Cassandra hurried him out the back door as a van pulled up to the back alley. Ray got in, and Cassandra pushed Eugene after.

“Come on, come on. Quickly!” the driver urged. Cassandra jumped in, and the van took off.

Inside the house, Armstrong went down into the basement, and confronted the doctor.

“I demand you let me go,” Sistrunk yelled.

Armstrong answered him with the butt of his rifle, sending Sistrunk to the floor. Sistrunk just looked up at him while Armstrong pointed his gun at him.

“What did you do to Eugene Sulke?”

“Nothing. Oh, a few cuts and bruises. It happens. People resist treatment.”

“Treatment?”

“Yes. They all come in here filled with such strange notions; such strange ideas. They need our help. We change them from misfits to constructive members of society. What’s so wrong with that?”

Armstrong looked around the lab. He saw the helmet sitting on the gurney. “What’s that for?”

“To cure Eugene of course. Let me help you. You will be caught, you know.” Armstrong still had his piece trained on Frankenstein. He looked at him as Sistrunk flashed his evil smile that so unnerved Eugene.

“How do you do it?”

“I’m sorry.”

“How do you change someone?”

“With a glorious invention, commonly known as the brain probe. I use it to force new neuron connections. Of course, that’s a bit simplistic, but I put it that way so you can understand.”

“Are you telling me that you’ve been fucking with Eugene’s head to change him against his will? Is that what you’re telling me?”

Sistrunk started to become hostile. “One day you’ll be in that chair, and I’m going to enjoy treating you.”

Armstrong was seething now, while Sistrunk flashed his sinister smile. As he looked around the lab, Sistrunk pulled the dead guard’s gun out from his lab coat, and began to point it at Armstrong.

“Sit in that chair,” Sistrunk demanded.

Armstrong turned around with a wry smile on his face, and shot the doctor.

Armstrong spied the truncheons hanging behind the metal chair. He grabbed the hard one and began smashing everything he saw in the lab: computers, machines, and the glass cabinet—everything. Then he took the gas can he brought down with him and emptied half of it; struck a match; and torched that horrible place. He hurried back upstairs, and emptied out

the rest of the gas. He burned the house down while retreating to a second van.

While this was going on, Sean held the rescue squad under fire. “Come on Sean!” said Armstrong, and both climbed into the second van.

“I heard a shot from the basement,” Sean said.

“I shot that doctor. He got the drop on me. We left him alone in the basement for two minutes. He must have fished out the revolver from one of the dead guards. I figured he didn’t know how to use it. He never cocked the trigger.”

Everyone was out, and Foote wrapped Wrenn’s arm with the bandages his buddy grabbed. He stopped the bleeding while they drove to a hospital in neutral territory. They switched vehicles on the way out so that the Squad would not be looking for them.



Ray and Cassandra were trying to talk to Eugene, reassuring him that he’d be all right. The van stuck to the back roads while traveling west from Old Chicago. A couple miles down the road they turned off into an empty parking lot, where another car and driver waited for them. They continued on the old road while the driver of the van went in a different direction.

Eugene was drifting in and out of consciousness until he opened his eyes. “Where am I?”

“You’re with us, buddy,” Ray said. “Do you remember me?”

Eugene stared blankly at him for a minute. “Ray?”

“Yeah, buddy. Can you tell us what happened to you?”

“Water, please.”

Eugene gulped it down.

“I hurt all over, and I’m hungry.”

“Ray, he needs to get to a hospital,” Cassandra said, “and,” as she made a face, “he needs a bath and new clothes.”

“Driver, do you know how to get to St. Teresa Medical Center in Snowden?”

“Yeah. It’s in neutral territory, but we’re going to have to get back on the tollway.”

“For how long?”

“About two miles.”

“Will we be able to bypass any tollgates?”

“Yeah, we will.”

“Go ahead and take it,” Ray said.

“What do you remember, Gene?” Cassandra asked.

Eugene just turned around to look at her. “You’re pretty cute yourself.”

Cassandra smiled, and then threw a curious glance at Ray before turning back to Eugene. “Thank you.”

“You have a pretty wife, Ray.”

“I know, man. I’m pretty lucky.”

Eugene turned back to Cassandra. “You were right about him.”

“Who? Dennis?”

“Yeah. He came to my house Saturday morning. I was supposed to go to his house, but I decided it was best to stay away from him. I made up some excuse so I wouldn’t have to go, but he came to my house anyway. We were drinking some beer, and the next thing I remembered was waking up in that place.”

“He must have slipped him a mickey,” Ray said.

“What time is it?”

“About three,” Ray said.

“They had a clock in there, but no windows. I could never be sure if it was night or day. I guess I smell like shit.”

“What happened in there?” Cassandra asked.

Ray offered him some more water while he inspected Eugene’s wounds.

Eugene told his story as best he could, but he was still groggy, tired, in pain, thirsty, and hungry. They were on the highway now, about twenty minutes from the hospital.

“We’re here now, sir,” the driver said.

“Good. Pull into emergency.”



“Mr. O’Reilly, I’m Doctor Ulysses Phillips. I’ve been assigned to look after your friend, Eugene Sulke. Could you please tell me what happened to my patient?”

“He was stuck in a small holding pen with no food or water for many hours, then beaten. I’m still trying to get more information from him. He was in Lightning Squad territory, and we were able to rescue him.”

“He’s severely dehydrated and traumatized. He was also drugged. We’re still running tests on the drugs used. I’ve treated his lacerations. There were no broken bones. We’ve hydrated him intravenously to get fluids to all the cells more quickly. A little longer and he may have suffered organ damage. He should be fine now.”

The three got back in the car, and Ray turned to Eugene. “Feel any better now?”

“Yeah. Thanks you guys for rescuing me. Are we going to my home now?”

Ray and Cassandra just looked at each other curiously, and then Ray turned to Eugene. “We’re taking you to our friend’s house. You’ll be safe there. You can rest up, get a bath, a change of clothes, and then we’ll take you to your parents’ home.”

Eugene stared at him, and said, “My parents’ home? Why?”

“They need to know what happened to you,” Cassandra said.

“No!” Eugene yelled. “I don’t want mom and dad to know what happened to me. I wasn’t gone long enough for them to worry, and if they complain that they tried to call me I’ll tell them that I dropped my cell phone, and that it was probably broke.”

“Eugene,” Ray said. “The world has irretrievably changed for you. You can never return to your old life. Dennis knows where you live, where you work, where your parents live; hell, everything about you.”

Eugene looked frightened. “What’s going to happen to me? What can I do?”

“Have you ever wondered about the New World, Eugene?” Cassandra said.

Eugene looked puzzled, and then sat back in the seat, contemplating an uncertain future. Still smarting from all that happened to him, he fell asleep.

Cassandra turned to her husband. “Do you want me to call Pamela?”

Ray thought about it a moment. “No, I’ll call her.”

Ray looked pensive, and then turned to his wife. “We have to go too.”

“Give up?”

Once again, Ray delayed answering. He seemed to take a deep breath, and then turned to his wife. “They know we’re involved. If they catch us

we'll probably be Hell House's next victims. Cass...this is the first time I'm genuinely scared."



"Mr. O'Reilly, Mr. Casimir wants to see you," Dennis's secretary, Faith said.

"Thank you."

Dennis just looked up at Faith with a sardonic smile. "Well, let's see the big guy."

Dennis made his customary three sharp raps on the door and entered. Casimir was pacing the floor behind his desk. He was tall, wiry, and about seventy years old. He was bald with taut but wrinkled skin. He turned to face Dennis as he entered and saluted.

"What the hell happened, O'Reilly?"

"Sir, I was just informed of this. Apparently the attack took place around 2:30 this morning. One of our squadrons came to Hell House in response to gunfire. They too came under attack. It was well-coordinated, sir. Whoever engineered the attack must have known what it was, and who was in it."

"Which leads you to believe what, Mr. O'Reilly?"

"That my brother was involved, sir."

"Not just involved, but my guess is he engineered the attack and kidnapping of our most valuable asset."

"Yes, sir. That's very likely, sir. Some of the guards, rotated before the attack, told me that some of Ray's old Blues were snooping around the house days before the attack."

"Why the hell didn't you do something then?"

"I only came to realize who they were when they showed me a picture of them. They didn't know them." There was a pause, and then Dennis dropped the other shoe. "They killed Sistrunk in the attack, and burned the house down. They destroyed everything."

Casimir stopped pacing, and turned to Dennis again. "I heard about the fire, but I didn't know about Sistrunk. Christ, O'Reilly, he's irreplaceable."

"But his son got away, sir; Peter Sistrunk. He knows the whole operation."

“Still, it’s going to set us back.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“I want a full report on what happened on my desk tomorrow morning. Now, what are you doing to recapture our prize?”

“We have an all points on them. One of the squad members got a partial license plate, and a description of one of the vans used to get my brother and his team out. We tracked the vehicle down, but there was no sign of any Blues or Sulke. My guess is that they are outside Squad territory.”

“Just fucking great,” Casimir growled. “I don’t blame you, Dennis. It’s that fucking security leader. What was his name?”

“Crawl, sir.”

“Crawl?”

“Yes, sir. That’s what we call him; John Viececrawl.”

“You picked him?”

“Yes, sir. His resume seemed impressive. I monitored his plans. He had about three dozen men under him.”

“That seems like overkill to me. One thing I know is if you don’t want someone knowing your business you learn to keep a low profile. If you have a safe, you don’t advertise it with a lot of no trespassing signs.”

“Yes, sir.” Dennis was downcast.

“Find him, Dennis.”

“Yes, sir.”



Dennis looked at the charred house the Squad bought just for “treatment”. “How many dead?” Dennis said to Squad leader Foulker, who witnessed the attack and carnage.

“Fifteen men, sir, plus the doctor.”

“Why the hell did they have to kill Sistrunk?”

There was no answer.

“Let me have a list of every member of the security team still alive?”

“Just give me a few minutes, sir.”



When Dennis got back to the office he began calling each member of the team. Most heard about what happened, but they couldn't provide any additional details. Only Marvin Goodspeed, a squad leader and a volunteer for watch duty, heard from Taylor Albright the night of the attack. He relayed the conversation to Dennis.

A pall fell over him as he came to realize that his computer must have been hacked by Ray's team. *The way they knew where everyone was could only come from my own documents. I failed again,* he said to himself as he started beating himself in a mocking gesture. *They knew what was going on better than most Squad members who helped set up Hell House. I can't have that. CAN'T HAVE THAT! I'm going to kill him, goddamnit. Kill him. He's fucked with me for the last time. I will kill him if it's the last thing I do.*

PART 2:
ESCAPE FROM OLD AMERICA

CHAPTER 12

ON TO THE FUTURE

“Come on in.” Dean said it like he was hoping they would leave. They all went in and Joanne made some sandwiches for everyone. Dean just sat there stoically, and then he turned angry as he looked at Gene. “What in the hell is going on, Eugene? A couple weeks ago you come in looking haggard with Dennis O’Reilly, telling me how he rescued you from the prison that you two put him in.” He was staring at Ray and Cassandra now. “Now you come home in worse shape, and you two are supposed to have rescued him from a house. Do I have that about right?”

“Be nice, dear, until we know what’s happening,” Joanne pleaded.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

Gene dove into his sandwich, and recounted the horrifying details of his kidnapping and imprisonment. Joanne reacted with shock, while Dean was stoic but angry.

Ray understood the tenuous nature of his being there and gulped before countering Dean. “Mr. and Mrs. Sulke, if Eugene is recaptured they will either kill him or put him back in Hell House. They know where he lives, works, where you live—well, you know what I mean. There’s really no other choice—all of you have to leave for New America.”

“Leave?” Dean asked with clear incredulity.

“Leave our home?” Joanne repeated. “But why?”

“Because you’re both in danger,” Ray said.

“You mean, because they could use us to get to Gene?” Dean said.

Ray nodded. “Exactly!”

“What can I do?” Gene said, rhetorically. “I’m screwed. Everything I ever wanted I’ve lost. First Catherine, and now I can’t ever go back to work. I can never enter Squad territory again. I don’t want to do anything that would lead me back to that house again.”

Dean looked at his wife. He was silent for a few minutes, but he had a look of determination. “I’m not leaving my home. This is still America. We

have laws, and that Casimir guy has no jurisdiction here. We're staying. Eugene can stay here with us. He'll work here in neutral territory. He can come to work for me; prepare to take over fully. I'm nearing retirement anyway. Eugene can sell his home and buy a new one. He could even change his name. There are things he can do. There are people who can help him."

"I wish I could make you understand that staying here is not an option," Ray said. "No place is safe. You're not safe. There are no people you could ever know that could keep your family safe. Please reconsider, Mr. and Mrs. Sulke. You must get away."

"Can you get him a visa into New America?" Dean asked.

"Absolutely!" Ray said. "They're given to anyone not on their non-approved list, and this is a list of American Party leaders in government and a few media moguls they accuse of being extremists in their hatred of New America. The real problem is getting an exit visa."

"An exit visa? What the hell is that?" Dean said.

"It is approval from the government to travel anywhere outside of the state you live in," Cassandra said.

"Wait!" Dean said. "This is the kind of stuff these commie countries do. We're a freedom-loving country."

"You might want to rethink that freedom-loving stuff," Cassandra said.

"Well, it's a fact, nevertheless," Ray said. "They'll also revoke his passport. Now, the exit visa generally isn't enforced if you drive across state lines. Technically, you need one, but very few states ask for it. Busses, trains, and planes are different, however. You can't buy a ticket that takes you across state lines without showing an exit visa on the ticket."

"When did this start?" Joanne asked.

"About three years ago," Cassandra said.

"Most exit visas are given automatically," Ray said. "Buy a ticket to Paris, no problem. Buy a ticket to Florida, no problem. This is why most people never heard of an exit visa. They never really see it. Yet it's there on any ticket you have in the form of a stamp. In this day and age, where the ticket is usually an e-ticket, you never see it. You're in the computer."

"Then what's it for?" Joanne asked.

"To keep people they don't like in," Ray said.

"Who is 'they'?" Joanne said.

"Powerful people," Ray said.

“You mean the government,” Dean said.

“More powerful than them,” Cassandra said.

“I don’t suppose Gene can get an exit visa,” Dean said. Ray and Cassandra nodded their heads. “Then how does my boy get out of here if he isn’t going to get an exit visa?”

“There is a way,” Cassandra said. “Do you remember Pamela Piper?”

“Redd’s sister,” Dean Sulke said, stoically.

“Exactly!” she said. “She still lives in Michigan; never did move to the New World. Instead, she helps people who are being persecuted. She’s expensive. It will cost Gene about twenty-five grand, but she can get him there.”

“I’ve got the money,” Gene said.

“Oh, God,” Joanne cried. “Will I ever see you again?”

“I don’t think he’ll ever be allowed to return,” Ray said.

“You really need to go as well; along with your other son,” Cassandra said.

Joanne turned to Dean with a look of disdain. “Leave our home? No. I won’t go.”

“We’re staying,” Dean said. “We have laws in this country. They can’t come here and just kidnap us.”

Ray’s cell phone rang. It was Sean. “Ray, there’s a car out front. I think it belongs to the Squad. I recognized it from Daniel’s research.”

“Thanks, Sean. Keep an eye on it.”

Ray hung up and gestured to Cass. “They’re out there.”

“Please,” Cassandra said, “you must leave. We won’t be able to protect you for long.”

Dean and Joanne looked frightened, but remained adamant. “Son, do you want to leave?” Joanne said.

“No, I don’t want to leave—I have to leave. I can’t ever be dragged back to Hell House again.”

“But,” Dean said, “didn’t you tell me that other guy burned the house down after destroying the lab?”

“That’s true,” Ray said, “but they’ll just rebuild it. They’re training doctors all over the country to use the brain probe. They’re building more labs all over as we speak. If they recapture Gene, they’ll bring him back to a new Hell House—”

“And I’m sure it will be tougher than ever to find it,” Cassandra said.

“I’m afraid,” Eugene said. “What if those guys break in and grab me?”

“They’re just here to report on what’s going on,” Ray said.

“But what if several squads are on the way here, now?” Eugene said.

“I can’t rule that out,” Ray said. He got on his phone and called Sean. They talked for a few minutes and then he hung up. “There’s no sign of activity from the Squad; nevertheless, we should get out of here.”

“Why can’t he just move to Canada? Or even Europe? Why does it have to be that commie place?” Dean asked.

“It’s too risky,” Ray said. “The U.S. has an extradition treaty with those countries. They’ll declare Eugene a fugitive and demand his return.”

“They’d just deport him; just like that?” Joanne asked.

“Maybe; probably,” Ray said. “If they refused, they’d come under retaliation from our government: reduced trade; increased tariff costs; even restrictions on travel to any country that refused to turn over Gene. The New World is really the best hope for Gene. They don’t have an extradition treaty; they speak English—no foreign language to learn; they have no unemployment, so finding a good paying job similar to what he had shouldn’t be hard to find. There’s no question about it, New America is the place to go. I wish you would reconsider your position.”

“What about your house, son?” mom said.

“I guess you’ll have to sell it for me.”

“And all your furniture, possessions, memories—oh God,” she gasped.

“I don’t want to go back to that house. There is nothing but bad memories for me there. These people took Catherine and then me. Even if the Squad left me alone, I think I’d still move.”

“Where will you go, now?” Joanne asked.

“I called Bo. He’s home now. We’re going over there next to try to talk him into going with us. Then we’ll be—”

Ray interrupted him. “It’s best if they don’t know.”

“You’ll be followed,” Dean said.

“We know how to throw off followers,” Ray said.

“Will we ever see you again?” Joanne asked, turning toward her son.

“I don’t suppose so. I’m going to have to leave pretty quickly. I wish you’d come with me. We can start a new life together; we’d still be a family—just in a different place.”

“Maybe one day that’ll happen,” Dean said.

“We can have some men watch your house,” Ray said. “At least until Eugene is safely away.”

Joanne gave her son a tearful hug, and said her final good-bye to him. Even Dean hugged him.

“Will he even be able to write or call?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know,” Ray said. “They pretty much terminated all communication with New America. They cut off land lines into and out of the country. They block cell phone transmissions, and the post office won’t accept mail from or to New America. There may be ways around it, but not many.”

This shocked Joanne, who put her hands to her mouth and gave a feeble shriek. Dean just stared blankly ahead. “Nothing lasts forever,” he finally said. “I know some people. They won’t shut my son away for all time. We’ll find a way.”

“Don’t worry, mom, dad. Until I cross over I’ll call nightly.”

Joanne hugged her son and began crying again. Dean put his arm around her. “There, there, Joanne. We have to let him go.”

“Please mom, dad, come with me. We’ll still be a family. Oh, please.”

“Not now, son. Maybe, someday. Maybe someday you’ll be able to return, but I won’t be run out of my home. We have good police here. They don’t side with Squads or RAC’s. We’ll be protected. We’ll be all right.”

With that, Gene said his final farewell to his mom and dad, and began a journey he would not soon forget.



“Mr. O’Reilly,” Stevens said from Eugene Sulke’s house. “We’ve entered the house and it appears to have been empty since the morning you picked him up. The car is still in the driveway. There’s still a tracker on it.”

“Stevens, check out his parent’s home.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dennis hung up and called Mad Dog. “Commander, he’s not at his home. He may be at his parents’ house. How long do we have before Alt House is ready?”

“Doc McCardell still won’t be here for two more weeks. We have most of the equipment ready.”

"I won't be able to give you much notice. As soon as we find him we may be forced to bring him in right away."

"Give me two days to set up a holding cell."

"I want far fewer guards outside this time: one guy in a car near the driveway, and one in the backyard; one more making rounds around the house, and one in the...no, make that two in the house at each entry door."

"You got it."

"Also, I don't want them in uniform. Put them in overalls and give them...oh, I don't know...a rake or something."

"I don't understand."

"I don't want them looking like guards. If they look like groundskeepers or something—"

"Oh, I got it. Yeah, good idea."

Dennis knocked on Casimer's door. "Come."

"Sir, Alt House will be ready for interrogation in two weeks. A holding cell will be ready in two days, sir. I don't know when we'll be ready for Sulke, but once we find him we'll have to bring him in right away. We can't risk escape."

"Is this Alt House in a secluded area?"

"Absolutely, sir! We have an eight foot fence all around it."

"Where have you looked?"

"We checked Sulke's home but he never returned there. My man is checking his parent's home now. I'm expecting his call back any time now."

"Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

Dennis returned to his office and perused all the motels and hotels in the area—thirty-seven of them ranging from B&B's to large-chain hotels.

"Sir, Mr. Stevens is on Line One," Faith said.

"Stevens, what do you got for me?"

"I'm at the family home in Countryside. Some goon followed me, so my guess is he's in there. With a little help we could take him out, break into the house, and get Sulke."

"Too dangerous. I'll get you help. We still have two more days before Alt House is ready, anyway. In the meantime I want to know everything that happens in that house. You'll be relieved every six hours. Got that?"

"Sure, Mr. O'Reilly."



The trip to Sean's house was a long one. They weren't able to convince Bo to come with them. Gene would have to go it alone: start a new life, find a new job, find a new home; and do it all in a place he scarcely knew, without being able to talk to his family; possibly forever.

Traveling down Route 88 toward Iowa, Gene fell asleep. Sean lived in a secluded area just northwest of La Motte, Illinois, down a dirt road off Main Street. Sean stayed behind to watch the Sulkes' house. Ray arranged for him to be relieved every eight hours. The Sulkes allowed each of the ex-Blues use of their house for food and rest. Pamela was expected to rendezvous at Sean's house sometime tomorrow, and they would be off toward the New World the following day.

Eugene woke up around the time Ray was on Route 61, heading north. "You know, Ray, when I was telling my mom and dad about Dennis, I held something back."

"What was that?" Cassandra asked.

"When I was talking to Professor Zinney, he told me to stay away from you two as well."

"Did he tell you that I talked to him?" Ray said.

"Yeah, he did. He thought you were crazy. He felt that you were using him, and I felt the same way."

"Gene, it was my fault. I pushed you too far and too fast. I'm really sorry to have put you through all that," Cassandra said.

"Did you guys know about Hell House?"

"No," Ray said.

"Ray," Cassandra said, coyly.

"What?"

"You know."

"Okay, I knew there was some place where they bring people to change them, usually they were very populist, then they change them into good little conservatives."

"So why me, Ray? Yeah, okay, so I'm a populist. So are a few million others, and many of them know Zinney."

“How many of them also know us?” Ray said. “How many of them were in the car with one of us when three Squad guys got shot?”

“Then why not leave me in prison? They were going to execute me, weren’t they?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Ray said. “We called your boss and left a message we hoped your lawyer would get. He must have caused some problems for Casimir and Martinez. I think that’s why they released you. But I also think that the combination of being in prison, your wife’s death, and us probably scared them into thinking you had already become radicalized. Hell House would be their final solution.”

“You guys called my boss?”

“We had to do something,” Cassandra said. “Springing you from jail would have been really difficult.”

“How did you guys know about my being in prison, and then in Hell House?”

“We have some very good people who care about you, Gene,” answered Cassandra. “We also have a spy inside Squad headquarters—Jay Casimir’s secretary. I believe I mentioned that to you.”

“We’re all ex-Blues,” Ray said. “Each of us has special skills we continue to use. Daniel is one of the best hackers, and Jimmy the Fox is an investigator and security guy. They can find out just about anything. Daniel hacked into Dennis’s computer and found out that’s where they brought you. Armstrong and his men are soldiers and sharpshooters. They planned and led the assault on Hell House.”

“How come you and Dennis are so different? You used to do everything together.”

Ray was silent at first. Cassandra looked at him perplexed. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Now something I had wondered about makes sense now,” Eugene said. Cassandra just looked at Gene, quizzically.

“When I got back to work after Dennis got me out, my boss knew I was in Joliet. He was so worried about me. I didn’t even get a chance to ask him how he knew I was there. I guess I just figured the warden notified him.”

“Not likely,” Ray said.

“Yeah, that’s what I realize now. It must have been your call. Stu would have called up the lawyer, and he probably raised hell with the DA. That’s when Casimir or whomever concocted the scheme to let me out and let

Dennis take the credit.” Gene paused and reflected. “Thanks for helping me, guys.”

Cassandra just smiled and wiped a tear from her eye.



“Mr. O’Reilly, Martz here. I just arrived at the Sulke house. Stevens is dead; throat slit. What do you want me to do?”

“Do you see anyone around?”

“A few parked cars on the street. Anyone of them could be occupied with the killer.”

“Wait there till I get some more men over to you. Don’t check for our killer until I get some help over there; then capture that goon who killed Stevens. Look for any sign Sulke is there.”

“I got to tell you, Mr. O’Reilly, I’m kind of nervous—vulnerable, you know.”

“Look, be on the alert. I’ll have somebody there in two hours. Don’t fall asleep or get distracted.”

“Yes, sir,” Martz said. He hung up and took a snort from a paper bag.

Dennis hung up and called Mad Dog. He told him what’d been happening.

“Commander, I need a squadron over to the Sulkes home right away.”

“You got it, Dennis. I’ll have them find and capture the other guy outside the Sulke’s. Then I’ll have them break into the house and get him.”

“Thanks, commander.” As Dennis hung up he was scared. *What if more Blues are involved? It may be more than a couple hours before I hear from Martz. I can’t lose Eugene. Do I dare tell the boss? No, I’ll wait to hear from Martz.*

More than two hours passed, and there was still no word from Martz. Dennis was frantic with worry. He thought about calling him, but hesitated, afraid he might not answer. Then, suddenly, the phone rang, but it wasn’t Martz on the other end of the line.

“This O’Reilly?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“This is Dean Sulke. You remember me, don’t you? I’m Eugene’s father. I just wanted to tell you that your men are all dead. Jesus Christ,

Dennis, what the hell are you trying to do? Your men tried to kidnap my wife and me. They demanded to know where Eugene was. Fortunately, my house was being guarded. What the hell happened to you, Dennis? You and my son used to be best friends. You rescued him from that prison. I invited you inside my house, and I put my trust in you. So did Eugene. You betrayed us!”

There was silence.

“You still there?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Then answer me. What the hell is going on? Talk to me.”

“I’m just trying to help Eugene, sir.”

“By kidnapping him and dragging him against his will to that torture house?”

“By helping him fit into society, sir.”

“He fit in just fine as he was, knucklehead.”

“Sir, I understand how you feel, but I have a job to do—”

“A job to do—oh, you have a job to do. And what would that be? Oh, I know, kidnap my son, torture him—”

“Sir, that was not my intent. We don’t torture—”

“My boy came home emaciated and starving. He had a black eye, split lip, and other cuts and bruises. He told me all about it—”

“I understand how you feel, but I am ordered to bring your son back, and that is just what I’m going to do with or—”

“You bastard! You’ll never get my son. He’s on his way to freedom. I don’t know where he is at, and I don’t expect I’ll ever see him again, thanks to you and your ilk. As for me and my family, I can assure you, Mr. O’Reilly, we are very well-protected. Your brother sent some men to watch our house for us, and the police are watching as well. And by the way, you can pick up the five thugs in the county morgue. Feel free to contact the Du Page County police. They want to talk to you.” With that, Dean hung up.

Dennis pounded his desk and stared. His face appeared contorted and reddened. His breathing deepened until he stood up and went to the boss’s door, knocked three times, entered, and saluted.

Casimir saw the despairing look on his protégé’s face and knew the news was not good. “Just don’t tell me you lost Sulke.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Ray or his men killed five of my men. Eugene is gone.” He filled in his boss with the terrible details from his talk with Dean Sulke,

and Casimir just looked downward.

“I have to talk to Martinez. Dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dennis walked back to his office, dejectedly. He opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a black pouch and a whiskey glass. Taking the flask out of the pouch, he poured a glass from the Christmas gift from last year, and drank it down. He started to put it away, but decided to take a second snort. Then he went into the bathroom, and gargled to hide the smell of alcohol.

Faith, called him from just outside his opened door. “Sir, Mr. Casimir has left for the day.”



Sean's House, Seven o'Clock the Next Morning

Ray was up early making breakfast, expecting Pamela at most any time. He had everything on the table when the doorbell rang.

Pamela was in her late sixties with greyish to white hair, wearing business attire and a pair of specs. Her hair appeared to be of moderate length, but coiled so the length was hard to tell. She was all business.

"Hello, Ray."

"Hello, Pamela. Come on in. Would you like something to eat? I have bacon, eggs, toast—"

"No, thank you," she said curtly. "Where is Eugene?"

"I guess I should get him and Cass up."

"I only need to speak with Eugene."

She sat down in a chair in the parlor. She sat strait up like a schoolmarm, her head up and facing away from Ray. Ray walked past her and up the stairs to Eugene's room.

Eugene came down and greeted Pamela while Ray spoke with his wife.

"She's here," he said.

"I heard. Is she still pissed?"

Ray cast a sarcastic expression. "Oh, yeah. I think she believes we want to steal her secrets and take over her operation."

Cassandra was smiling. "She's used to being paid...and paid a lot."

Ray wore a stern expression. "She's being paid...just not in dollars. We'll provide a valuable service...one she'll need...and not one she'll have to pay for."

They came downstairs and Ray shouted, "Breakfast is ready. Everyone in the kitchen...Pamela included."

Eugene was wearing jogging pants and a tee shirt, when he escorted Pamela into the kitchen. Pamela still refused food, but agreed to a glass of orange juice.

After they ate, Pamela turned to Eugene. "Excited?"

"A little excited and a lot scared." Eugene was still smarting from his adventure in Hell House, and he still looked like the loser in a prize fight.

His left eye was still purplish, although the swelling was almost gone. Cuts and bruises around his mouth and the left side of his face would take longer to heal. "I'm not sure what Ray told you, but there are a lot of bad guys who are going to be after us, and it's a long drive to New America."

"Don't worry, Eugene, we'll be fine; and I've escorted clients to New America who were wanted by thieves, police, paramilitary, and family members. I've never lost one yet."

"Having Ray and Cassandra along makes me feel better."

Pamela winced at that, but she forced a smile. "Well, to be honest, I don't think we need them, but if it makes you feel better, then they're welcome to come along."

"We'll be several miles behind you, Gene," Ray said. "You won't see us, but we've got a special phone for you and Pamela so we can stay in touch."

"Special phone?" Eugene said.

"Yeah. It's encrypted so no one can listen in. We'll be in constant contact, and we can alert you if anything suspicious is happening."

"Sounds great," Gene said. Pamela was reticent.

After everyone finished breakfast, Pamela turned to Eugene. "Let's step out to the porch and talk about what's going to happen next, and the prep work we need to do."

Eugene would be in disguise. Pamela called up her friend, Louisa, a Hollywood makeup artist, and arranged to come to La Motte later that day. She then called another guy she worked with who would create their route. He knew where all the RAC and Squad territories were, as well as neutral territories that were really neutral or friendly to one of the other paramilitary territories.

Finally, she had a friend in the government who spied on NOGOV. He'd be able to find out where all the paramilitary forces were.

The plans were finalized and Eugene was made to look ten years older. Pamela bought an older looking car to more easily blend in with the general population. Ray and Cassandra would stay a mile or so behind, but they would be in phone contact, while Sean and the Fox would watch the Sulke household. At six o'clock the following morning the four would-be escapees would be on their way to the New World.



Dennis stood at attention in front of Jaydan Casimir, who busied himself behind his desk. Without looking up, he told Dennis to sit down. Casimir continued to work at his desk, ignoring him. Then he finished what he was doing, reached into a drawer, and pulled something out. Casimir looked up at Dennis and smiled.

“Everything that has happened so far is not entirely unexpected, Dennis. These soldiers of ours are little more than traffic cops. Eugene is protected by an army of ex-Blues—not just your brother, mind you—but a whole army. A few Squad members are not likely to fair too well against them. Do you read much history, Dennis?”

“History, sir? No, I guess not.”

“Have you heard of Genghis Khan?”

“Uh...yeah, I’ve heard of him.”

“He was the leader of the Mongol Empire in the Thirteenth Century. He was one of the most feared leaders in history. He commanded an army of hundreds of thousands of men. You know how he conquered his enemies?”

“No, sir.”

“He’d use his vast superiority of numbers to encircle his enemy from many miles away; too far to be seen. Then, slowly, he’d move in. The more he’d tighten the noose, so to speak, the stronger and thicker it became. By the time his enemy realized what was happening, it was too late.

“Now, you take our situation. Our enemy is strong and powerful, but they lack numbers. We estimate there’s about one hundred of them around the country; maybe two hundred. It’s hard to tell with them. They don’t advertise or brag about themselves. They seem to come out of nowhere, overwhelm their prey, and vanish as quickly as they appear.” Dennis looked on passively.

“They created the Lightning Squad, you know,” Casimir said. “They were all populists, created to fight the RAC. They developed the strategy of appearing quickly; stealthily. They recruited the toughest and best to be Squad members and leaders. The original guys were the generals—came from the elite units in the army, marines, navy—you know, the Seals, Delta force; shit like that. When the government went broke they were released

from the military. A lot of them became mercenary soldiers, fighting for anyone who would hire them; but some, like the Blues, became Populists. They wore blue uniforms with brown trim; the opposite of their foot soldiers, like us, who wear brown uniforms with blue trim.

“They introduced the motorcycle as their principle form of transportation. Motorcycles can go anywhere, unlike cars and trucks. They can fit through narrow lanes; can be off-road. They used only electric vehicles or heavily muffled gas vehicles—they didn’t want to be heard. When they went after somebody they’d appear from three different directions, triangulating their prey. They’d be on top of them before their enemy knew what was happening. They were good, Dennis; too damn good.

“When I took over I stopped their attacks on the RAC. I wanted both forces to work together. I’d command the most powerful paramilitary outfit in the world. I’d run the show, Dennis. I’d be the most powerful man in the country—more powerful than Martinez or the President, but those goddamned Blues wouldn’t cooperate. They just wouldn’t cooperate.”

Dennis was still not sure where this was going. He knew the history of the Lightning Squad. It was part of his training, but he’d never heard it straight from Casimir’s mouth before.

“So I got rid of them. They were too dangerous, but I have a healthy respect for them; which brings us to my point.”

At last, thought Dennis.

“The mistake we’ve been making was going up against the Blues with a few traffic cops. But what we have going for us are numbers. We have over four hundred thousand Squad members and RAC soldiers across the country, and we can use our sheer force of numbers to beat them. I can’t outwit them, but I can use our numbers to encircle them, tighten the noose, and leave the Blues and our Eugene Sulke with no place to go.

“Think of it, Dennis. Wherever Sulke goes a whole bunch of those Blues show up. They watch his house, his parents’ house; and when we stuck him in Hell House they somehow knew he was there, and with lightning action they rescued the brat and burned down our house. You can bet they’re still around Sulke. Now we’re not just going to recapture him, we’re going to capture the whole lot of them.” Casimir was smiling now, and his face brightened further as he continued with his grand idea.

“You see where I’m going now, don’t you, Dennis? We’ve got an opportunity now I never thought I’d live to see. We capture Eugene Sulke and we capture maybe a dozen Blues. We stick them all in Hell Houses and start the Blues again—only, this time, under our control.” Casimir was beaming now.

“I’m putting you in charge of executing the plan. Think of yourself as Genghis Khan.” Now, Jaydan took the piece of paper he was holding and slid it over to Dennis.

It was a budget—a million dollar budget—to be used for recruiting Squad soldiers and necessary resources. “It’s all I could get,” he continued. “I tried to get more money from Martinez, but he’s so tight-fisted. Nevertheless, we can use this money to bribe people at every rest stop, gas station, inn—shit, every place those guys would stop at. They’d just observe and report. Then we use the Lightning Squad to come at them from all different directions—you know, tighten the noose. We’ll overwhelm them with force of numbers, just like Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde. By the time those guys realize what’s happening, it’ll be too late. We’ll have them.

“Now, Dennis, this is all going to take careful planning. I need intelligence: how many there are with Sulke, where they are, what they are driving—shit, everything. Then use the money from our budget as a reward for your recruited spies. Whatever is left from this budget is yours to keep. Furthermore, if you are successful, there’s a twenty-five thousand dollar bonus and a significant promotion. You’ll be way more than a brigade commander. You’ll be my permanent assistant. Are you ready, Dennis?”

“Yes, sir!” Dennis O’Reilly said, beaming.

“Or should I call you Genghis?” Casimir began laughing now. His white teeth gleamed like he just discovered he’d won a million bucks, but then he turned serious. “Don’t let me down, Genghis.”

Dennis returned jubilantly to his office. He took another snort from his flask, this time as a victory swig. Then he started reflecting on his new power and responsibility and felt overwhelmed by it. The more he thought about his task, the more unworkable it seemed to him. *Four hundred thousand Squad men surrounding Eugene Sulke and his friends. How much would that cost me? What’s a million divided by four hundred thousand? About two bucks? How can I make this work? I’m supposed to be this Khan guy and I’m just a Squad leader. Christ! I’m a traffic cop!*

CHAPTER 13: THE NEW PILGRIMS

“Commandant, Captain Paoli is on Line three.”

“Casimir here.”

(After a pause), “What is it?”

(A few minutes later), “Jesus Christ. Are you kidding me? What the hell happened, Paoli?”

(After another pause), “Grifton? Oh, for Christ sake.”

(After another minute), “Shit! All right. I’ll be there in about an hour.”



Pamela and Eugene were just entering Iowa with Ray and Cassandra behind them. As they drove up to the state border check, Eugene braced for their first encounter. Eugene was given a fake ID with the name Phillip Mulligan from Dearborn, Michigan. He was driving with his sister, Jennifer Mulligan. They were going to visit their sick mother in Idaho.

The first border stop was easy. The northern half of Iowa was neutral territory, and they didn’t care for any of the paramilitary organizations or the need for exit visas, which Pamela had copied onto passports issued by a friend.

No special preparation was made for Ray and Cassandra. If the Squad had sent information that they were wanted, the O’Reilly’s may have had to take drastic action. Ray calmly told the border guard that he was with the Mulligans. The guards motioned them through.



“Do you love me, sweetie?” Catherine said.

“Yes, I love you, my sweets.”

“How much do you love me?”

“I love you more than there are stars in the sky.”

Catherine just smiled and kissed her husband. Gene loved everything about her: the sweet moist warmth of her breath, the feel of her touch, and the lovely clutch of her embrace.

“What do you love most about me?” she prattled on, playfully.

“Everything.”

“But what do you love the most about me?”

Eugene thought about it, smiled, and said, “Your eyes.”

Catherine smiled, playfully. “What about my eyes?”

“They’re the first thing I noticed about you. They’re so beautifully shaped and bright; so feminine....” He hesitated; not sure how to express himself.

Catherine put her head on Gene’s lap and smiled upward at his awkward responses. Eugene returned the smile, wanting to give the perfect responses and fumbling through them. It was what Catherine loved most about him. He was real, unpretentious, and he cared so much to please her. “You have such a beautiful smile, my husband.” She reached up to him and kissed him voraciously.

“Tell me you love me, Genie.”

“Gene.” Eugene sat there with a soft smile on his face.

“Eugene!” Pamela said, more insistently.

Eugene’s smile was gone as he turned to look at her.

“You looked so lost in thought.”

“Oh, sorry. I was just remembering something my wife used to do.”

“You must miss her very much.” Eugene didn’t respond and seemed to prefer to be alone with his thoughts.



It wasn’t until around two p.m. that Jaydan Casimir reached Brigade Unit 187 of the Joliet district. Captain Paoli completed his investigation and escorted Commandant Casimir down to the basement of Joliet Hell House.

“Doc Grifton will be all right,” the Captain said to Commandant Casimir.

“How could this have happened?”

“Fortunately for us, Doc Grifton was able to give us a full report, which is still so fantastic that I’m having trouble understanding how such a thing happened. I’ll relay the essential parts of the report to you now, and then I’ll send you the full report sometime tomorrow, when we’re able to complete it.”

“Start from the beginning, Marco.”

“From what Doc said, everything was going pretty well—at least normally—when...Jeez, he just went off his rocker.”

“What stage was Menendez in at this time?”

“Just the first stage of treatment. He was undergoing initial phase brain probe treatment. He’d been subjected to it eight or ten times. Doc said he’d have to check his notes to get an accurate number. It will be on my report.”

“First stage? He was still in the initial stage?”

“Yeah, for about a month.”

“I know. I had him brought here about a month ago.”

“He resisted just like his ex-wife did. It took her six months to be cured...well...you know that. The way Menendez was going, it would have been probably as long. You can’t always tell, according to Doc Grifton. Some guys stay in Stage 1 for a month...hell, even longer; then fly through the remaining stages.”

“What was Grifton doing here in the first place? I thought...oh, what was his name?”

“Pinzon, Dr. Pinzon, sir. He trained under Doc Sistrunk.”

“So, how did Grifton get involved?”

“It was just recently, sir. When Doc Pinzon was having trouble making progress with Menendez he called on Doc Grifton for help.”

“All right, tell me what happened when he went nuts.”

“It’s like I said, he received eight or nine sessions—I’ll have the exact amount in my final report—and I guess he just couldn’t take it anymore. He was strapped in the chair, given several probes and then released. He appeared pretty much out of it. They usually have to carry him to the table, but this time he stood up on his own, like a drunk who’s still on his feet, but he spoke quite clearly.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said, ‘I’m feeling much better now.’”

“He just went through a brain probe treatment and said he’s feeling better now?”

“Doc thought he was probably in shock. He says it happens sometimes. Anyway, doc says he asked Menendez if he needed help getting on the table, and he says ‘no, it won’t be necessary’. He figured he meant he would climb on the table by himself, but we know now that isn’t what he meant.”

“Then what happened?”

“That’s when he went nuts, sir. He grabbed a bottle of some chemical—I’ll have the exact specimen in my report. Anyway, he clobbers the guard with the bottle in the forehead so the chemicals dripped into his eyes. He screamed and covered them. Then Menendez grabbed a scalpel and—oh, Jeez—just slit the poor bastard’s throat with it.”

“What was the doc doing when this was going on?”

“He froze.”

“What did Menendez do next?”

“Well...and this is the difficult part, sir. Menendez grabbed hold of the doctor and forced him in the chair. I believe the report, sir, will indicate he slugged the doctor, and then forced him in the chair. Anyway, sir, he turned the machine back on. Doc realized what he was going to do and pleaded with him not to touch the probe; that it was a delicate instrument—”

“I know, I know, Marco. Now, was Grifton strapped down?”

“Sorry, I forgot to mention that. Yeah, he strapped his arms and feet in.”

“Didn’t Doctor Grifton struggle with him?”

“Doc said Menendez overpowered him. I don’t think Doc’s very strong. He’s kind of old, sir. He screamed but no one came downstairs.”

“How can that be?”

“According to the other guard, he assumed it was Menendez screaming. He simply ignored it. He says it was just business. He doesn’t go down unless he’s called.”

“Wasn’t Doc calling for him?”

“No. Doc says Menendez was going to kill him if he yelled for anyone. He still had the scalpel in his hand. Doc says he was scared shitless.”

“What about the others: nurse, recorder, others?”

“On break. I guess Menendez just waited for the right opportunity.”

“Okay. Then what happened?”

“Menendez strapped him in. Then he turned on the machine and dialed the volume up high. Doc didn’t think he would know how to use the machine, but he must have been paying attention. Doc tried to talk him through the adjustment process, but Menendez would have nothing of it. Doc tried to reason with him. He said you have to use lower settings or it could destroy the brain. Are you ready for this, Commandant?”

“Go ahead.”

“Doc says Menendez just had this look of a maniac. He had a grin on his face like...Jeez, how do I describe it? It was like that grin Jack Nicholson had in the movie, *The Shining*, when he went after his wife with the axe.”

“Less dramatics, Paoli. So I guess he turned on the machine?”

“Oh, yeah. Then he planted the probe right on his noggin. That’s when Doc let out a real scream. His whole body went tense. Menendez just kept wiggling it around. He learned that whenever Doc Pinzon wiggled it, it hurt more. Now, this is when it got really creepy. Menendez, with that same diabolical smile says, ‘Like it doc? How ‘bout another one?’ Then he sticks the probe on another part of his noggin. Then he says, ‘Like it here,’ and sticks it in another part of his head and says, ‘How ‘bout there, and there, and there’. All the while he keeps jabbing and wiggling the probe. Then he stopped to taunt the doctor.”

“What did he say?”

“‘There, there, now. That wasn’t so bad now. Oh, you make such a fuss’—shit like that. Doc said it was like he was drilling holes in his brain. Then he resumed jabbing him. All the while Doc says Menendez just had this murderous look on his face while he’s jabbing him.”

“That’s enough, Paoli. I get it. About how many times did he jab him?”

“Doc says he doesn’t know. It just seemed to go on, and on, and on.”

“Was Doc still conscious?”

“Doc says he doesn’t know when he lost consciousness. When he came around he was sitting on the floor right over there. That’s where we found him.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, this part is speculation. There weren’t any witnesses, but the evidence points to what happened next. Menendez got back on the chair. He evidently took the thing off its holder and was holding the probe in his hand. He sat down in the chair. Ah, Jeez.”

“Go on, Paoli. What did he do?”

“He taped the damn thing to his head. Then he pushed the ON button. The upstairs guard heard continuous screaming that lasted about ten minutes. He’d never heard anything like that before and it scared him. So he came downstairs.”

Casimir just looked at him.

“Well, he started to come down the stairs and the screaming stopped. He said he stopped as well, and thought about going back up, but there was a strange silence. He said he slowly walked down the stairs. He said he should have heard some talking or moving around, but there was total silence. ‘This wasn’t right,’ he said. So he came all the way down, and he saw the first guard dead; then he saw Doc Grifton barely moving, but pointing to the chair. Christ, sir, I’m sorry, but I’ll never get that look out of my mind. He was still in that chair when I came in.”

“What did you see, Marco?”

“It was Menendez, sir, sitting in that chair with the probe taped to him. His head was cocked to one side, and his mouth was wide open in a frozen look of horror. His face was bright red with tear streaks on his cheek. His pants and the floor below the chair were all wet with urine.”

Paoli stopped to get another sip of water. “It wasn’t like anything I ever saw before. We took plenty of photos. They’ll be in the final report.”

“The thing I can’t figure out,” Casimir said, “was why did he do it? Why didn’t he try to escape? He could have taken the gun from the dead guard. Once he got rid of the upstairs guard he could have made it to freedom.”

“I know,” Paoli said. “I asked the same question of Doc Grifton. He just said that Menendez told him of his desire to escape. Doc said, ‘Where would you go? We’d just recapture you again.’ He said Menendez just kept muttering about how he missed his wife—I mean....”

Casimir looked cross, and Paoli continued. “I guess that he didn’t want to live without her. I guess, sir, that he just wanted to die.”



The exiles were now at the southwestern border of South Dakota. This was neutral territory, but the kind that sided with the RAC. Ray and Cassandra

led the way across because they feared they would have to furnish I.D. Fortunately, they went through, and Eugene and Pamela followed them. The plan was to take the back roads going north and west until they reached North Dakota.

Sticking to the east end was considered the safest, but they would have to use the back roads, making the trip all the longer. They would have to go through North Dakota and into Manitoba before swinging down to northern Montana. The Canadian border was controlled by people friendly toward the Old American government, but at the two crossing points, few questions were asked. This was the primary benefit of Pamela's contact in Congress.

The journey, thus far, was pleasant, but Pamela figured by this time the Lightning Squad would be organized, and a cooperation network with the RAC would be set up. Furthermore, there might be mercenaries looking for them, assuming they'd figured out the vehicle they were driving, but Pamela had anticipated this.

She would trade vehicles with a contact provided by her Congressional contact. It was a private dealer that also helped people who weren't allowed a visa to New America, but were being persecuted by local authorities sympathetic to the RAC. They would make contact about 75 miles up, about a two hour drive from the back roads.

They traded their ten year old Impala for a fourteen year old Toyota Camry—an even trade. The Camry had about four hundred thousand miles on it, but the car ran well and had new brakes. They turned in for the night at a small family-owned motel. The motel was owned and operated by a friend of the Piper family that also assisted people trying to leave the country. He was a general manager in one of the cooperatives set up during the time just prior to the Rust Belt bombings, and might have been killed if he were working the night shift. He never forgot that, and dedicated his life in helping escapees.

“Pamela, it's great to see you so soon.”

“Jeff, this is Eugene Sulke. He went through Hell House and is being looked for as we speak. Gene, this is Jeff Blakely, he was a friend of my brother. You can trust him.”

“I'm pleased to meet you, sir.”

“He is a polite one,” Jeff said, who just laughed. Then he got serious. “You went through Hell House?”

“Yes, sir...I mean, Jeff.”

“I’ve heard stories, but I never met anyone who ever went through it. How come they weren’t able to change you over? I mean, I thought no one ever comes out without being...well, fucked up.”

“I know what you mean, Jeff. Fortunately, I only spent about three days in that place before I was rescued.”

“Jesus Christ. What was it like? I mean, I’ll understand if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Eugene looked downcast. He started to tell the motel manager about it, but his speech became raspy and halted.

Pamela saw that this was a subject that her charge was not yet ready to talk about. “I think we should talk about something else,” she said.

They talked for a couple hours until Eugene and Pamela got too tired and turned in for the night. Eugene turned on the television, which only had a few stations, and no cable. He normally didn’t watch much TV anyway, but there was nothing to do. He found an old Jimmy Stewart movie on a UHF channel. It was a Western in black and white; not what he was hoping for, but he did like Jimmy Stewart.

Moms, dads, are you sick
and tired of being talked back
to by your child?

“Ah, Jeez,” Eugene mumbled aloud.

Tired of the arguments?
The failing grades? Then I
have good news for you. You
just bring that little devil of

yours to Tough Love Camp and I'll return you a little angel. You heard me right, folks. For just nine ninety-nine we'll turn your devil into a little angel. And if you call in the next fifteen minutes, I'll take ten percent off, and give you free infusions of our famous tough love approach while your child is in school.

Just bring your child in right after school lets out and I'll return your child when school starts again; all ready to tackle school just like the little angel you always wanted.

Call the number on the screen in the next fifteen minutes and totally revamp

your child's behavior. Call
now!

Eugene could hardly contain himself. He let out a scream that scared Pamela, who had the adjacent room.

"Gene, are you okay?"

Eugene let her in, but he was still fuming as he relayed the commercial to her. "Jesus Christ, from Hell House to tough love camp. Government brainwashing camps weren't enough. Now this guy figured out how to make a buck off it. What's next? They turn it into a movie? The Stepford Kids Enter School. 'Watch little Johnny turn from brat to angel right before your eyes; just like you always wanted.' They can all walk around with weird smiles on their face with 'yes, teacher,' and 'no, sir;' and 'may I wash the dishes, mom?' Sure, just fry the brain up really good, and just shove all that goodness in their little sponge brains, and they'll be as good as new. Holy Jesus, Mary, and mackerel. Can you believe this?"

"Yeah, I've seen that before too, but it's just some camp parents send their kids to. I think they just started them up last year. Surely, you don't think they're the same thing you went through?"

"I think they're much the same as what I went through. They might not knock the little tykes around, but I'm certain it's the same thing. God, how can they do this to anyone, let alone children? Of all things!"

"Please, Gene, calm down. There's nothing you can do about it. Just put it behind you and concentrate on getting to New America."

"I'm sorry, Pamela. You're right, but when you've gone through the same thing I did it's impossible to put it behind you. I'm going to remember that place. Christ, Pamela, Hell House is one thing, but now they're privatizing them. They're charging for the privilege of torturing their children, and they don't even know it. They shoot you full of drugs until you're so fucked up you don't know up from down. That's what they do, and now they make you pay for the privilege of being drugged into some sort of controlled state. What the hell? It's like Professor Zinney said, 'Gene, it's not government you should fear, it's what comes after.'"



Dennis O'Reilly was running Command Central for Operation Capture out of his new office. He had a large wall-size map of the country. He created new borders with colored markers: red for Squad territory, black for RAC, green for purely neutral territory, pink for neutral territory friendly to the Squad, and brown for neutral territory friendly to the RAC.

Next, he mapped out a likely route his fugitives would take, maximizing purely neutral territory. He would bribe anyone along the perceived route to look out for them, and promise rewards for the eventual arrest and capture of them. He had Squad or RAC people circulating pictures the Squad had on file of the escapees.

He solicited volunteers from Squad and RAC soldiers. He promised a ten thousand dollar reward for the capture of each man and five hundred dollars for information leading to their capture. There weren't many volunteers. He then told them that Jaydan Casimir would remember any of the volunteers. It would be a good career move, he hinted. This created a few more volunteers, but Dennis hardly felt like Genghis Kahn.

Dennis knew this was no easy assignment. He didn't even know the type of vehicle they were driving. He could only guess at the route they were likely to take, and he knew he needed a lot more information before he could even think about arrest and capture. He knew he needed help, and so he took a deep breath and knocked on Jaydan Casimir's door.

"Come!"

"Sir, I need your expertise."

"Sit." Dennis did as directed. "I was wondering when you were coming in. Are you familiar with the Hogs?"

"Hogs, sir?"

"There are a few dozen of them in groups of three or six around the country; motorcycle gangs. Their leader, Carlos Colderon, used to be with the Blue Squad, like your brother. Not all of them joined Ray, thank God. Colderon worked for me in the past. He's smart but cranky—actually, he can be quite violent. He didn't like the idea of working with the RAC, but he never got along with your brother either. He considered him and his buddies from the Blues too idealistic." Casimir looked pensive.

“I think he’d murder his own mother if the price was right. You’ll have to offer him at least 25 G’s to get his support, but you’ll need it. He also won’t do anything until he gets the money up front, and there’s no guarantee he’ll help us either. Better to offer him half now and the other... well, you know how it goes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ve already spoken to him. Colderon was noncommittal because I told him he’d be working for you. He needs to hear from you first. He’ll try to intimidate you, so you’ve got to assert yourself. Be respectful though, or you’ll lose him, but be authoritative as well. He’s very temperamental and doesn’t trust anyone. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here’s his card. He uses a mobile phone, so you can call him. You need him, O’Reilly, but get your ducks in a row before you call him. I know you’ve projected a route that your brother might take, but you must find out what they’re driving. Call all the used car lots in a fifty mile radius from Countryside that is still in neutral territory. Ask for a white Suburban no more than a couple years old. That’s the car Pamela was known to be driving. We believe she exchanged the vehicle for another one. Bribe the dealer to find out if a Suburban was just bought in the past week or so, and if it was Pamela’s. Find out what she bought. Get as much info as possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

Casimir looked suspiciously at Dennis. “You sure you can handle this?”

“Yes, sir. You can count on me, sir.”

CHAPTER 14:

HOGS

“Gene...something isn’t it?” Mark said. He wore a big grin while Eugene looked on, worried.

“Why did you go this way? It will only slow us down. You should stick to the highway.”

Mark paid no attention to Gene. He stopped and just stared up at them. Even Gene had to marvel at them.

“The tombstones; nothing like them,” Mark said.

Eugene stared at the empty high rises up and down Michigan Avenue. “It’s a ghost town. This place is so creepy. You can’t go far. The roads are no good. No one ever comes in here anymore.”

Mark continued to ignore his colleague and stared upward. “Just think, Gene, this street used to be jammed with traffic. Thousands of people lived here. At the other end was the place of commerce in Old Chicago; only it wasn’t old then.” Mark smiled. “This place was alive.”

Eugene smiled. He admitted a certain fascination with the old times. “Look over there,” he said, pointing toward the lake. “That was the old Mercantile Center. My father used to talk about how his father would take him there in the fall for the annual auto show, and then in the spring for the boat show. Now it’s just a partially caved in piece of junk.”

“I know. My father used to talk about it too. Then there was the Tech Museum by the lake. Remember that, Gene, and that great toy train that must have taken up about an acre of space?”

“Yeah, I remembered taking a class trip there once. Then the city ran out of money and they closed it down, right along with the school that sent us there. Come on, let’s get out of here before these old buildings fall down on us.”

Mark turned around, but he had to move slowly because of the poor condition of the road. “Damn potholes,” he said.

“They seem to get worse every year.” Eugene stirred. Pamela glanced over to him. “Penny for your thoughts?” she said with a smile.



Ray and Cassandra were about an hour behind Eugene and Pamela, but they had a tracker on them. Ray typically contacted Pamela each night. She was still ambivalent about them, but she put on a friendly countenance for Eugene’s sake.

A couple years ago the Lightning Squad arrested her when she was on her way back from escorting a family out of the country. They charged her with aiding and abetting a known fugitive. A government official went after Commandant Casimir, just a month into his new position, and threatened to arrest him for civil rights violations. Casimir backed down and ordered the Squad to free Pamela. From then on, the Squad would go after the fugitives, but not Pamela.

This was the current situation. Pamela’s security expert gave her a route, and she had a friendly senator in Congress that would apprise her of any danger. Now she had extra security tailing her at a considerable distance.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until the fourth day of their departure. As Ray and Cassandra were traveling down the same road as Pamela, they saw a motorcycle gang roar past them. “Hogs,” Cassandra said.

“They’re known in these parts.”

“Do you think they could be after Eugene?”

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions, dear. Increase our speed and follow them.”



Jeff Blakely heard the roar. He looked outside to see a motorcycle gang. They were whooping it up and revving their engines. Startled, Jeff came out, and their leader, wearing a helmet in the shape of a hog’s head, walked toward him. He was grinning. Jeff stepped back.

“Got room for me and my Hogs?” Carlos Colderon asked.

Jeff tried to remain calm and polite. “Yes, certainly, sir. How many are there in your party?”

Colderon just laughed, and the others began to cackle as they entered the office. Colderon was a big man of Mexican heritage, though he spoke little Spanish. Raised in the angry east end of Los Angeles, he got his start with an old biker gang that controlled that part of the city. Drafted into the Mideast Wars, he displayed a ferocity that marked him for greatness. He won a dozen or more medals while serving in the Green Berets. When he was mustered out of the military he joined the Blue Squad as one of their leaders, but he soon fell out of favor with them, and started his own paramilitary organization—the Hogs. Created to control, he’d rob from anyone that had money, and used the money to buy favors. He’d steal off Blues and RAC soldiers to create a powerful force that Casimir won over a few years later.

Life was good for Carlos, who thought he could retire and live a life of luxury, but he soon got bored with that. His Hogs, in the meantime, couldn’t decide on a leader, and talked Colderon into returning. Now, sporting a full grey beard and a 300-pound bulk frame, he changed the mission of the Hogs. Now, they’d work for the Squad or RAC as mercenaries, charging plenty of money for their services. He shed much of his membership, keeping the best of them, and waited for Casimir to call him with his next mission. Now, working for a guy he swore he’d never work for, his fee doubled.

“This your sign-in book?” Colderon said to Blakely.

“Yes—”

Colderon grabbed the book before Jeff could finish. “Who is Jennifer and Phillip Mulligan?”

“The last two guests. Why do you ask?”

“What’d they look like?”

“That information is private, I’m afraid.”

“He’s afraid,” Colderon said to his guffawing Hogs. “Says its private,” stretching out the word. The Hogs continued laughing.

Turning to Blakely, he said, nonchalantly, “When did they leave?”

“A little while ago.”

“Where were they going?”

“I don’t know.”

Colderon smiled and looked at his Hogs. Then he turned back to Blakeley, only now the smile was gone. "Now, proprietor, these are the new rules. You work for me from now on. When I ask you questions, you give me straight-forward answers; no bullshit. Get it?"

Jeff didn't answer.

Colderon growled and slapped him viciously, sending him sprawling to the floor, and against his front desk. He was stunned; the Hogs cackled.

Colderon helped him up.

"GET IT?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, who were those last guests? I want to know their real names."

"I only know what they wrote in the reservation log."

"What did they look like?"

Blakely was flustered. He dabbed his cut lip with the sleeve of his shirt, and then stared at Colderon. "The woman was in her late sixties, I believe; grey hair, nice figure, glasses, attractive. The gentleman was about five-eight, mid-fifties, grey hair, fairly heavy set."

Colderon smiled now. "That's better. Now we're off to a good start. Now, proprietor, where did they go?"

"They went north, but they didn't tell me where they were going, and I never ask."

"Describe their vehicle."

"It was grey, I think; a sedan. I didn't notice anything else."

"He's lying, boss," one of the Hogs said. "Look, it's all right here in the book."

Colderon checked it out, and then turned vicious again. He moved toward Blakely, who backed into a wall. Colderon hit him with a vicious right hook and knocked him to the floor. Then picked him up again.

"I swear to God I didn't know that."

"What is her real name?"

"I don't know." Blakely was in tears as he dabbed his left cheek. Colderon struck him again.

"Pamela Piper."

"What was the man's name?"

"I don't know."

"YES, YOU DO! DON'T MAKE ME ASK YOU AGAIN."

“Sulke. That’s all I know.” Blakely was bleeding from both lips, and his left eye was swelling up.

“Where were they going?”

“They wouldn’t tell me.”

“YOU’RE LYING!”

“I swear, I don’t know.”

Colderon slapped him hard again, and then again. “WHERE WERE THEY GOING?” grabbing Blakely by the shirt.

“New America.”



Ray and Cassandra saw the Hogs in the motel parking lot, and drove around back. “You count the number of bikes, Cass?”

“Six.”

“Let’s make sure we count six when they leave.”

They waited almost a half hour before they left. They drove away fast, going north. “It seems pretty clear they know exactly where to go,” Ray said, who drove around the front to check on the proprietor.

“Ray, shouldn’t we be going after them?”

“There’re six of them and only two of us, Cass. Let’s talk to the proprietor first.”

When Ray and Cassandra walked in they found Blakely sitting on the floor with his back to the front wall. His hands were on his face and he was weeping noticeably.

“Mr. Blakely,” Ray said. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

The two helped Jeff to his feet, and sat him down in a chair. Cassandra went out to grab a first aid kit.

“Mr. Blakely, my name is Ray O’Reilly. I’m assisting Pamela in getting Eugene to New America.”

Jeff looked at him, still rattled. “I ratted on them.” He just kept shaking his head back and forth. “I ratted on them,” he repeated somewhat mournfully.

Cassandra returned and began treating his wounds. “They gave you a nice shiner,” she said with a smile.

“They know what she was driving, and got the plate number from the log book.”

Ray took a look at it; saw the names, car plates and description. Ray smiled. “Pamela’s certainly no fool—false description.”

“You mean they’re chasing the wrong vehicle?”

“You didn’t give them away,” Cassandra said.

“Let me call Pamela anyway, so they can duck out of the way,” Ray said.



Dirksen Building, Third Floor, Office of Senator Everson Moore.

Ev paced behind his desk, looking worried, when Gino Cuccione entered his office. Ev looked at him. Cuccione pointed to the bar and Ev nodded. “Make one for me too.”

“Well, you were right. Intelligence was a little slow.” Gino walked over to the credenza, grabbed a couple glasses, and put a couple ice cubes in them before picking out a bottle of Cutty Sark. He fixed the drinks.

“Okay, let’s hear it,” Ev said.

“Dennis O’Reilly negotiated a deal with them—twenty-five G’s.” He handed Ev a drink and took a swig. “I think it was Jaydan Casimir’s doing. He uses them for especially difficult assignments. He had to convince them he’d be working for O’Reilly.” Gino downed the remainder of his drink, and poured himself another one.

“How close are they?”

“Colderon missed them by less than thirty minutes. Fortunately, they’re looking for the wrong vehicle. Ray call you?”

Ev nodded, and sat down on the couch, drink in hand. “I let him know about security issues. He knows how to handle them. The real question is why we didn’t know ahead of time.” He was staring at Gino. “She makes a pretty good campaign contribution. I’d hate to let her down.”

Gino downed his drink. He pursed his lips and set his glass down in the bar sink. “Gotta go kick some ass, boss.”



They all held their glasses aloft. “What should we drink to?” Stuart Everson said, playfully. “I know—may things always stay this great!” The four of them acknowledged the sentiment and downed their wine glasses.

As the setting sun dipped below the Fortress walls, Eugene reflected on the possibility of living here one day. He knew Stu liked him. Stu even

hinted that one day this could be his new home. With lovely Catherine at his side, Eugene stared across the lush landscape, drinking in the nectar of the azaleas. He turned to his wife, glowing with a warm smile, and felt these days would never end. Even when he went home he knew one day he'd be back for good. He glanced at Stu and his wife, who were relaxing as they watched the orange-splashed speckle of the park across from them.

"Something isn't it?" Stu said, watching the colors of the setting sun. "It makes everything worthwhile."

Then the air conditioning suddenly shut off.

"Generator, honey," Mrs. Everson said.

Stu looked over at Eugene. "Fuel must be running low. I better check on it."

Pamela's phone rang. "Yes, Ray. What is it?" Eugene's ears bristled. He turned toward her and watched her mouth open in a look of surprise.

"Hogs?"

(Pause) "Yes, I know what to do.... How far?"

(Pause) "Okay, we'll turn off at Page Street."

(Pause) "Yeah, I got it. We'll wait for you there."

She hung up. Eugene gave her a look. "The Squad's on to us," she said, trying to look cheerful.

"Christ."

"Don't worry, Eugene. They're looking for our old car, with different plates from a different state. We'll lose them." Both were silent while Pamela reflected on the new circumstances. *Looks like Ray and Cassandra will finally have a chance to earn their keep.*

"What did you mean by hogs?" Eugene said.

"The Hogs. They're ex-blues; really vicious. We may have to do something to slow them down. They're about ten minutes behind. Turn right about two miles ahead, and increase your speed a bit. That's it. Not too much. We don't want to attract unneeded attention. Good."

Eugene turned off onto a side road and Pamela told him to keep going at the speed limit of forty.

"Ray, it's Pamela. We're on Page Street, traveling east. Let me know where the Hogs go."

Ray grabbed a map, looking for an alternative route to take. The Hogs were out of sight. They didn't want them to think they were being followed.

“Pamela, Ray. I’m not sure where the Hogs are. We’ll meet you at the rendezvous point.”

Ray spotted Pamela’s car and parked behind her.

“It looks like we lost them,” Ray said, “but they may double back this way. According to the map, we’re in Page. Let’s hope there’s a motel here where we can hide out for a while.”

Then, unexpectedly, they heard the sounds of motorcycle engines. The Hogs were coming. They quickly ducked into their cars and waited for them to go by.

“We better find that motel and lay low for a while,” Ray said.

Pamela glanced over to Eugene. He looked straight ahead; scared.

CHAPTER 15:

THE FACE OF THE DEVIL

“Tell me how much you love me,” Catherine said, playfully.

Catherine was in a sexy negligée, flirting with her husband. He smiled as he tenderly embraced her. She caressed his scrotum, arousing him. They kissed passionately, and Eugene drank in all the love she had for him. He closed his eyes, fell into her arms, and passionately kissed her. When their lips parted, and his eyes opened, he stared into the face of Jaydan Casimir. All he saw were gleaming white teeth surrounded by rotting flesh.

Casimir leered at him with an evil grin. “I have your wife,” he said, and then laughed. He grabbed Eugene’s head and forced his lips to his own. Eugene fought and moaned, but Jaydan’s grip was too strong. Finally, he pushed him away and stared at him, grinning broadly, with worms coming out of his putrefying lips. “Now, I have you too.”

Eugene screamed in terror, but Jaydan still had his arms around his head, laughing. He tried to get away, screaming until the grip lessened and became more tender.

“Eugene, what’s wrong? Please, talk to me.”

He was sitting in the middle of the motel room floor. His hands were clasped behind his head, slumped down, rocking back and forth, and acting as if he’d lost his mind.

Then suddenly he stopped bawling and looked up at her. “I’m sorry, Pamela. I must have had a nightmare. I’ll be all right.”

She helped him up to his bed. He seemed calmer as he turned to her in embarrassment, and then stood up and began walking around his room. “Everything is gone,” flicking his arm this way and that way. “It’s all gone: my wife, my job, my family; everyone and everything that meant anything to me. They’re all gone.”

He stopped and stared at Pamela with a frightening look on his face. “But that’s not the worst of it. Was it ever real? Was it all a lie? Was I just deceiving myself about everything?”

Pamela just stared at him.

Eugene paused and looked down as if searching his mind. Then he looked up at Pamela again. “You must think I’m crazy. I loved my wife, but I started to hate her when she started drinking heavily.” He started to cover his face and looked away. “Oh God, I started to hate her. What a selfish prick. I didn’t understand, maybe I didn’t want to understand.” Eugene was sobbing heavily at this point. “I tried to get her to go to AA. She wasn’t an alcoholic. Why didn’t I realize that? Something was clearly happening to her, but she couldn’t tell me. She couldn’t tell me because I think she knew I wouldn’t understand, that I wasn’t ready to. I was selfish, Pamela. I wanted my dream girl back—for my own pleasure. I couldn’t or didn’t want to pierce the veil Catherine put between us. I didn’t want to see what was behind it. I only wanted what pleased me.”

Pamela rushed over to him and put her arm around his shoulders. “Gene, it’s understandable. Let it go, sweetheart. Don’t let it eat you up.”

“But it does. And it isn’t just Catherine. It’s worse still. Every day I would curse the neighborhoods I passed through, but it was my own work that helped create them. I got them into sex, drugs, and gambling. I set up the books for them. I’d suggest things like life enhancement activities. I’d provide the accounting categories for them that made these activities seem perfectly legitimate without some CEO having to refer to them as they really are. He wouldn’t have to sully himself with what he was actually doing.”

Eugene looked up at Pamela with sad eyes as if seeking forgiveness while admitting his sins. “I was offered a promotion—the very thing I wanted most of all—and I would have taken it too. You know what it was? I’d be the number two man in the company. I would have a house in the Fortress. I could watch the azaleas bloom. All I had to do was lead the country into further ruin. And I would have taken the job too. Christ, Pamela, the very thing that gave my life meaning, destroyed it for everyone else. Now my life is gone too, and I don’t know how to replace it. I know New America doesn’t have these problems, but I think I’ve lost my soul.”

Pamela looked on in silent anguish.

“It was all a lie. The whole world...my whole world was disintegrating, and all I could think of was that damn promotion, a home in the fortress, and lovely, beautiful Catherine. I didn’t care about anyone or anything else.

I didn't care, Pamela." He began sobbing openly as he sat back on the bed, covering his face in shame.

Then he stopped crying, turned to her, red-faced and tear-stained with goggled eyes. He stood up as if to make a grand announcement. Looking at her, now sorrowfully, he spoke with a raised voice. "I WANT MY WORLD BACK! I don't want to go anywhere else." Then he crumbled to the floor again, his back leaning against the bed, the palms of his hands against his forehead, elbows against his knees, and crying. "I can't take it anymore, Pamela. Prison, Hell House, Hogs. When does it end? I can't find meaning in my life anymore. I'm an empty shell. I hate myself, but I want that mad, decadent life back again. I want my naiveté back. I want my ignorance back. I want sober, lovely Catherine back. I want to feel good again."

Pamela knelt down beside him, putting her arm around him and hugging him tightly, crying as well.

"I'm dead, aren't I? I mean spiritually dead. I can't have it back and I shouldn't want it back. I don't want to be selfish old Gene. I don't want to use people for my own comfort, but there is nothing else for me. Maybe I should just let them change me. Maybe I could stand the pain—others did. I'd fit in. They could make me forget Zinney. Then they'd never fear I'm going to start some revolution."

Eugene continued to look at Pamela wearing a somber expression. "They could make me forget Catherine. I wouldn't have to face the pain of guilt or loss. I could have that promotion. I could fall in love again. This time, have a family of my own. Life would be good. I wouldn't feel guilty about what I was doing to others. I wouldn't even care. Let's go back, Pamela. I could call Dennis up and tell him I'll take Hell House. I'd cooperate. They wouldn't have to beat me."

Pamela looked frightened, shaking her head sideways with a crimsoned face, listening to Eugene's mad attempts to find happiness in a dead world. "Gene, listen to me," holding him tight while helping him up, and sitting him down in a chair. She kept her eye on him, afraid his madness would get worse, while grabbing another chair, and pulling it over to him.

"I know how you feel. This isn't a dumb cliché. I really do know how you feel, but I tell you this, Gene. There is a better world waiting for you."

Eugene looked downcast. "I can't accept it. I've made up my mind. I want to go back."

"Gene, you don't understand. The world you know is dead."

“But my father and mother, and my brother Bo—they’re still there. And they’re real; they’re alive. They aren’t dead to me or anyone else.”

“Gene, listen to me. I promised your mother something that I’m now going to violate because I believe she really wants you to know. Your father hasn’t had any real work in months. Haven’t you noticed the neighborhood? No one fixes the potholes or drains the town swamp anymore. People aren’t fixing up their homes. Weeds grow in many yards—your parents’ yard. Your father needed help from your Uncle John. Soon that help will dwindle.”

Eugene was puzzled. “But you never met my parents.”

“Yes, I did. I met them before I met you. When Ray called me and told me you needed to escape—he also told me about your parents. He was really worried about them. I called your mother up, and she invited me over. We talked. Oh, Gene, she’s just like you are now. She yearns for the life that is dead now. She couldn’t bear leaving her home because in her own mind it’s still the grand place she remembered when she fell in love with your father. Intellectually, she sees the deterioration, but it was the world of her youth that gave her pleasure. She can’t separate herself from that world. She and your father cling to it like a life preserver.”

Eugene looked at Pamela with a curious and puzzling visage. “I never really noticed that about the old neighborhood. It still felt vibrant. It still felt like home.”

“Do any of your childhood friends still live there?”

“No. They all moved away.”

“Do you know the neighbors?”

“Not really.”

“Then it really isn’t home anymore. You can’t let go of the past and neither can your parents, even though it’s eating all of you up inside. You don’t know anything better, so you cling to what always felt good before.”

“I believe it’s more than that, Pamela. I understand what you’re saying, but it’s more than that. Whatever we destroyed, we can bring it back. The conservatives do make one good point. People have to take responsibility for their own lives. I could take that job, and then move my parents to a better place. They could move into my neighborhood. I could help dad find new markets. There is much I can do.”

“It won’t work. You see, honey, it’s about more than taking responsibility for our own lives. We all share in the same problems. How

long would that job last? How much can you squeeze out of people who have next to nothing? No matter what cute name you give to crap, it still amounts to the same thing. The well is running dry, Gene. If you aren't producing something that makes the world a better place, it will become a worse one. If one suffers, we all suffer. Do you remember that poem by John Donne?"

‘No man is an island, entire of itself.... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’

“Do you remember that, Gene?"

He nodded.

“Old America is running out of time. As more people become poor and unemployed there are fewer dollars to buy things. When they've spent their last dollar on women, booze, and drugs there won't be anything left. The rich can just look for new opportunities somewhere else, but even that won't last much longer. They devour everything they touch. When it's all gone, they're done for too. Gene, this world is dead. No amount of personal responsibility is ever going to change that.”

Eugene's lips began to quiver, but he listened.

“Your father failed, not because of anything he did or didn't do, but because his clients failed. His clients failed because their customers failed. Their customers failed because their employers failed. It is a cycle of failure because this thing—I don't know—corporatism, or whatever free enterprise got twisted into, is a failure. The New World has a better way. Hold on, Gene. We'll get there.”

The news of his father's disintegrating business struck him hard. “Then why didn't he come with me? Why didn't they want to come?"

“Your father is a proud man. As long as he felt he could endure, he wouldn't leave. To leave would be to give up, and your mother and father just couldn't do that. It isn't in their nature. Your father believes in responsibility, and that means never giving up. He's blinded by the fact that there's nothing left to give up. His clients are all suffering; therefore, he suffers.

“It’s the same with your brother, Bo. He’s supposed to set an example for you. He works sixteen hour days—sometimes twenty—just to stay ahead of the game. Soon, it won’t be enough. But the thought of giving up is so repulsive to him that he won’t do it until his world comes crashing down on him.

“We’re all in this together, Gene. It’s just like John Donne says...‘No man is an island’. What happens to one of us affects all of us. Personal responsibility isn’t enough. We live in the same stink we create for others. The rich and powerful try to wall themselves off from it, but it won’t last. Utility companies are shutting down for want of customers. They shut down; even the rich won’t have electricity. Oh sure, they could build their own generators, but where would the fuel come from? Fuel distribution is dwindling because of fewer customers. There’s no money in it anymore. The rich are being consumed by their own greed. Nothing it touches will last; not even the Fortress. Those azaleas you mentioned—they have a dark side. They’re highly toxic. Just like your world. You can wall off yourself from all the rot, but you get consumed by it as well. The beauty of azaleas only disguise the rot.”

“So even if I could have my old life back, I’d lose it anyway?”

“Yes, dear. Hell House is the totalitarian answer to keeping people in line, but the system has failed all of us. All it can do is rub our nose in the stink and make us believe it’s the nectar of the azaleas.”

Eugene let out a laugh through his sorrowful countenance.

“There is a future, dear. It’s where we’re going. In time your family will join you. When the realization that there is nothing left to hold onto hits home, they’ll come. Your father hinted at that when you last talked to him. Just be strong. As bad as everything seems now, it-will-get-better. You must believe me. You must go on. We will endure. We will survive. WE-WILL-GO-ON.”

CHAPTER 16: STIRRINGS

Sandy began to stir. She started kicking her feet and talking in her sleep. “No, no! Let me go!”

Casimir stirred and woke up to the kicking. Sandy quieted for a time and Casimir rolled over. Then, after a few minutes, the kicking started again.

“FERNANDO!” She sat up in the bed with her mouth agape.

Casimir jumped up and reached over to his wife. “Dear, are you all right?”

Sandy was panting. She reached out to her husband and hugged him.

“There, there now. It was just a bad dream,” he said. Sandy was crying. Her breathing was brisk and shallow, and her heart was racing, gradually calming.

“It was so real. I was in some kind of hospital and I think this doctor was giving me electro-shock therapy. The pain seemed so real. I never had a dream like this before.”

Jaydan frowned.



Dennis's phone rang. “Hello.”

“It's Colderon.”

“Do you have them?”

“Well, we tracked them to a motel off the interstate and confirmed that Pamela and Eugene were there. Then we lost them. We did confirm they're heading to New America, but we were too far behind them. We doubled back to some country road. It was about the only thing around in this good for nothing place. We cruised up and down and couldn't find them. I think they gave us false plates.”

“So you’re telling me the trail went cold.”

“We’ll find them, and you better pay what you promised when we do.”

Dennis marched into Casimir’s office with the bad news.

“They’re smart. Tell Colderon to use every man he can get, and set up lookouts at all the motels west of their last known location. Forget about looking at the vehicles, look for our targets.”



The next night there was even less peace in the Casimir household. Jaydan awoke to his wife’s kicking again. Sandy was talking in her sleep. She was muttering, “no, no, no, no....” Then she started calling Fernando’s name when she woke up. This time she remembered the name she kept calling out.

“It’s just another bad dream,” he said, as he comforted his wife.

“Who is Fernando?”

“It must be someone who hurt you; maybe some old boyfriend who hit you. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I am worried, honey. I started having these flashbacks, or something like it, about a week ago. I know I should have mentioned it to you, but I didn’t think much of it.”

“What sort of flashbacks?”

“I don’t know. They were just some bits and pieces; dreamlike.”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it. I’ll get you some sedatives that will help you sleep better.”

Sandy took the sedatives that her husband gave her, but the dreams of another life would still come.

“Sandy, I’m so sorry.”

Sandy opened up the gift. It was a bracelet. “Oh, honey, it’s beautiful. What are you so sorry about?”

“It’s our first anniversary and I wanted it to be special.”

Sandy looked at the bracelet again and realized the base was a cheap material, probably tin, made to look like silver, and the stones were costume jewelry.

Sandy was startled awake and realized it was the alarm clock waking up her husband.

“How’d you sleep tonight? Any bad dreams?”

“No, no bad dreams. I slept well.”

She got up and put a house coat on, and then went downstairs to make breakfast.

Sandy managed to hide the dreams from her husband; not to mention the flashbacks that were starting to become more frequent. After Jaydan left for the office, Sandy would sit in the living room with no television or radio. She would close the terra cotta drapes. It was quiet. She’d make a cup of tea for herself, sit in a chair, empty her mind, and wait for the next flashback. It usually didn’t take long.

Jail? I was in jail? I will be in jail? Oh, this is so confusing. What does it mean?

Sandy wished she could talk it over with a dear friend, but she didn’t have any. It seemed strange that she had no close friends, and yet the dreams and flashbacks seemed to indicate she had many of them.

Every day was the same. Jaydan would wake up and Sandy would fix breakfast: scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee. He would go to work while Sandy would clean a little, watch television, read a magazine, and wait until he came home. They made love occasionally; ten minutes, and then he’d roll over and go to sleep. It was like this five days a week. Weekends were worse. He’d go out, rarely taking Sandy, and yet Sandy never felt like protesting.

Did she love him? She felt like she did, but she didn’t know why. He was much older than her. She never felt used or mistreated, but there was no excitement either. Bev was the closest thing she had to a friend, but she was the wife of Captain Miller, and anything she told Bev would make its way to her husband’s ear.

The more she thought about it, the more she wondered how she even met her. She would come over from time to time just for a chat. She was never invited over to her house or ever invited out for shopping, or to meet any of her friends. It seemed both strange and comfortable.

How odd. She wondered how being alone with no real friends of her own could be comfortable. *My dreams and occasional flashbacks are the only exciting things in my life,* she mused.

She took another sip of her tea. *The weirdest dream was being in jail. I’ve had that dream twice. The second one is the one I don’t understand. I remember being released, but it was unpleasant. There was pain. Pain from*

what? But I was in pain. Tortured, maybe? Oh, I wish I could make sense of something.

She took another sip of tea and tried to empty her mind, but thoughts about her dreams kept spilling out. She began reflecting on the dream she had the other night, when Fernando took her dancing. She was with friends, laughing, and having such a good time. *Am I destined to meet this person? Did I know him in another life? I wonder....*

“OH!” She covered her face with her hands. It was a vision. A signature. *Fernando Menendez. Menendez! I have a last name. Oh my God. I have a last name. Computer? Just the laptop. Jay has it. Should I wait for him to come home? No. No internet connection. Oh darn.*

Still, Sandy was happy. *Is he real? I can still see his face. Maybe he’s in the social media.*

Sandy called a cab and went down to the Old Chicago Public Library. It was their busy time and she had to wait almost an hour to get on the internet. At last, it was her turn. She went to the search engine and typed in ‘Fernando Menendez.’ She got a couple thousand references. She went to the social media and got about a dozen references. Security was being tightened and she could only request being a friend before she could see his picture and bio. Then she’d have to wait for this Fernando to respond. She decided to go back to the search engine.

It was quarter past two and she’d been on the computer for about forty minutes. It would shut off in twenty minutes and she’d have to schedule another sitting, and possibly wait another hour. *Oh, dear. Everything is a dead end. Wait! What’s this?* She started reading an article in the Old Chicago News about a Fernando Menendez who died under mysterious circumstances. *Picture, oh picture,* she mumbled. *Please be a picture.* Then she saw a picture of the dead man. *Oh, how horrible. I need a picture of him alive. Oh, come on now. Then, Yes! Oh, yes. Oh my God, I think that’s him. Oh, I just can’t be sure.*

She printed out the article with the picture. The picture was bad enough on the screen. It was worse printed out. She remembered that she hadn’t checked the date. She perused the article again and found it. *Only a few weeks ago.*

Ten minutes left. She went back to the search engine and typed ‘Sandra Menendez’. There were about a hundred references. She thought she was getting warmer, and then the internet cut off. She was out of time.

About forty minutes later she was back on another machine. She typed 'Sandra Menendez' in again, and after about a half hour she was nowhere. Nothing about her was in there; just a bunch of junk files like 'find Sandra Menendez', 'read about Sandra Menendez', 'we found Sandra Menendez'. All were dead ends. Then she remembered the two dreams when she was in jail and went back to the search engine.

She typed, 'Sandra Menendez in jail'. She struck pay dirt. There was an article about Sandra Menendez being released from jail by Commandant Jaydan Casimir.

Oh my God! Jay! Her heart was beginning to race now. She printed out the article. Now she was feeling fearful. *Did I live some other life?* She felt confused, nervous, and not sure if she wanted to know any more. She decided she didn't, and ran out of there.



The dreams were coming every night now, and they were getting more insightful. The flashbacks came and went, and were largely like a snapshot of some event in her memory. She began going out after Jaydan left, exploring her dreams. She went to the fortress and the Old Chicago police and asked if they had a police record on her. They didn't. She dreamed she was in Joliet Prison so she called their personnel office to see if she was there. They wouldn't release that information. She answered an ad on the internet telling her that they could find any police record on her, but they couldn't. *What to do?* muttering to herself.

She thought about asking Jaydan about it. *If somehow I was in jail, and Jay got me out, and there was a Fernando that I knew, would Jay acknowledge it? Would he insist that I take the sedatives again?* She decided to wait to see if the dreams and flashbacks would unveil new information. She didn't have long to wait.

Hell House? It was a flashback. She began to remember a dream she had a while back. She didn't understand it and just forgot about it. She dreamed she was in a medical clinic of some kind and hooked up to machines. There was a lot of pain involved, but she dismissed the dream. After all, she reasoned, she never liked medical clinics or hospitals. *Was this a real fear?* She couldn't remember ever being in such a place before.

Was this an irrational fear? I had never had irrational thoughts about anything before. She decided on the library again.

She typed in 'Hell House'. She was disappointed. There were mostly references to books and movies with Hell House in it. There were religious references; even a motel, an amusement park, and a gift store—nothing that helped her.

There wasn't much time left. She was about to give up when she saw a strange reference to Jaydan Casimir. There wasn't much else, but once again, her husband became front and center with her dreams. *Why? What is going on?*



Another week passed and another week of dreams, then a few flashbacks. It was sweet dream week when most of her dreams were about Fernando. A strange familiarity began to develop in Sandy's mind. The dreams began to seem more real than they did before, while, at the same time, her life with Jaydan Casimir seemed less real.

The phone rang. It was Bev. "Oh, hi, hon. I'm glad I got you."

"What's up, Bev?"

"Nothing too much. Just a message to relay to Jay."

"Oh! Let me get some paper.... Okay. What's the message?"

"The Alt House will close in two weeks."

She repeated the message. "Is that anything like Hell House?" She didn't mean to mention it. It just blurted out.

"Oh, you know about Hell House?"

"Yes."

"Well, of course, you're Jay's wife. Why wouldn't you know? As a matter of fact, they're pretty much the same thing, but Hell House in Old Chicago got destroyed. That's where they were treating Eugene Sulke until his friends engineered his escape."

"Jay tells me a lot of these things, but I haven't paid much attention. Is that what they sometimes call the House of Pain?"

"Well, I'm not sure if I've ever heard of that name before, but there's certainly a lot of pain going on in there."

"Thank you, Bev, I'll relay that message."

I didn't mean to ask her about Hell House. Should I be even more reckless? I've gone this far, and so how about a little closer to the edge?

"Lightning Squad Headquarters, how may I direct your call?" came the voice at the other end of the line.

"I'd like to speak to Dennis O'Reilly please. This is Mrs. Jaydan Casimir."

"Of course, Mrs. Casimir. I'll put you through."

"Hello, Mrs. Casimir. What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Mr. O'Reilly. Thanks for taking my call. I just wanted to forward a message to you that I received from Mrs. Beverly Miller. She said that Alt House would be closing in two weeks."

"Well, I'm glad you did call me. Your husband is out of the office and this is information that we need right away. I'll make sure he gets the message."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. While I've got you on the phone, I'm wondering if I could ask you something?"

"Sure, anything. What is it?"

"I've been trying to remember if I was ever in Hell House before?"

Dennis was silent a moment. "Uh, not that I know of Mrs. Casimir. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Jay talks about it sometimes and it seems I've been there, but I guess I was mistaken."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Jay tells me a lot of things, but I have such a silly head; it goes in one way and goes right back out. Is it true they can change a person?"

"Well, I'm not sure if I should be talking about this, but since that crazy guy selling behavioral changes on the children, I guess it doesn't matter. Yeah, they can change people's behavior. If you're interested, I can give you the address of that guy's website. It's toughlovecamp.com."

"Thank you, Dennis. Would you do me a big favor?"

"Sure, Mrs. Casimir."

"Please don't mention our conversation with my husband. He'll think, 'Oh sure, she can talk to you about this stuff, but she can't talk about it with her own husband?'"

Dennis smiled. "Oh, sure, Mrs. Casimir. I understand perfectly. Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Can they change memories?"

“They can pretty much do whatever they want.”

“Thank you, Dennis, and don’t forget to keep this just between us.”

Sandy was deep in thought, and then she began frowning. *Oh my God.*



Doc Grifton was at the Mercy Psychiatric Institute. His mind was deteriorating. The hospital chief was a man named Schmidt. When Commandant Jaydan Casimir told him he needed to talk to Grifton, Schmidt thought it might help.

“Thank you for letting me see him, doctor,” Casimir said.

“I hope you can be of some help,” Schmidt said through his rather thick German accent. “His mind has been deteriorating since the accident.”

“Accident? Hell I’d call it attempted murder.”

“At any rate, Commandant, since the attempted murder he continued to relive the pain-induced incident. He doesn’t sleep without a sedative, and when he does sleep he wakes up in a cold sweat, or screaming.”

“Is that when he was brought here?”

“He checked himself in voluntarily. We brought him to Mercy Hospital for an fMRI. It showed neurological damage which appears to be spreading.”

“From that brain probe?”

“Exactly!”

“How is that possible? It’s not supposed to have any effect on the brain. Wasn’t it Doc Grifton who invented it?”

“I worked on it as well. It does no physical damage to the brain, but it most certainly affects the neurons. The reason why patients come out of there much better than before is because of the expertise of trained doctors and the technicians who set up the machine.

“Let me explain. When a patient is first brought in for treatment, the first step is to map the brain. This is necessary in the adjustment of the probe settings. The brain probe has two functions. Most people believe it’s just used as punishment, but that’s wrong. It is not meant to be used to induce pain as punishment. It is used first, to break up certain neuron connections that aid the patient in losing whatever malady we’re trying to cure him of. Secondly, it prepares the patient for the cure that follows.”

“Why does the probe cause so much pain?”

“It’s because of the electromagnetism of the brain probe. Moving the neurons around induces a certain amount of pain. Some people described it as a boring in or out of the brain, while others describe it as rats trying to claw their way out. It’s an unfortunate side effect, but we can remove their memory of it.”

“Okay, but what do you mean by ‘moving neurons around’?”

“Of course, what I’m saying is a bit simplistic, but essentially I’m talking about creating new neuron connections, and breaking off old ones. The purpose of it is to change the person. You can change their personality, character, and memories. You can erase memories and certain behaviors simply by breaking the neuron connections. Furthermore, you can create new behaviors, personality traits, or character traits simply by creating new neuron pathways.

“Grifton’s genius was his ability to map the brain by getting the patient to exhibit their traits to see where in the brain these neuron pathways were, and then breaking them. Through dozens of treatments he was able to know where to make the new connections. He could then erase the memories of the entire treatment. The patient thinks he’s the same person as always; whatever we want him or her to be.”

“You can see where the neuron connections are that need to be broken or reconnected?”

“Well, sort of. With Dr. Grifton’s machine he can get rather precise locations of the affected neuron connections. Then it’s a matter of trial and error. That’s why there are so many treatments.”

“And there’s no way the old memories come back?”

“How can there be? Those connections are gone.”

“There’s still one thing I don’t understand. If the brain probe merely changes one’s memories and the other stuff, why is Grifton’s brain deteriorating?”

“Because Menendez didn’t know how to use the machine, and was only interested in inflicting pain. He used the highest settings, and just moved the probe around so as to inflict as much pain as possible. It caused physical damage—not just neuron changes, but he may have destroyed his brain.”

“Can he be cured?”

“If we can stop the spreading deterioration the brain could heal itself. It wouldn’t be unheard of, but the prognosis is not good.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I think I’ll see Grifton now.”

They walked down the hall to Grifton’s room.

“Fred.” Grifton looked up. “Do you remember Commandant Casimir of the Lightning Squad?”

Grifton looked over to the Commandant. He had a curious look on his face but said nothing. Schmidt excused himself and left Casimir with him.

“Dr. Grifton, do you remember when I talked to you about Sandra Menendez?”

There was still no reaction from him.

“You treated her, convinced her to divorce her husband, Fernando Menendez, and to fall in love with me. Do you remember?”

Grifton struggled with his words. He finally blurted out a quick, “yes.”

“She’s been having nightmares and I think she’s starting to remember. She keeps shouting ‘Fernando.’ I was giving her sedatives, but she was still having dreams of her former life. She woke me up the other night kicking and murmuring. Then she called the warden at Joliet. What should I do?”

“Impossible! Impossible! Neuron connections severed. Impossible!”

“Schmidt says the same thing, but she’s shouting Menendez’s name in her sleep. What do you make of that?”

“I told Menendez this wasn’t a toy. He wouldn’t listen,” Grifton said in a gruff tone. “The probe is a delicate instrument. You have to use it just right, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Grifton, I’m talking about my wife.”

“I tried to tell him to reduce the settings, at least.” Grifton sounded panicky as he looked up to Casimir. “I said, ‘see that dial behind you’, then he just jabbed my head with the probe. He was happy about it, too. He just jabbed and jabbed and jabbed.”

“Grifton! What about my wife? What about Sandy? We’re talking about Sandy. She’s starting to remember, and don’t tell me about impossible. She’s calling out that bum’s name.”

“I don’t know how many times it was. It was just over and over and....”

Casimir began to leave when Grifton shouted, “Sedratol.” Casimir turned around and stared at Grifton, but Grifton began rambling on again.

“Dr. Schmidt,” Casimir said, sitting down across from Schmidt’s desk. “Grifton wasn’t much help. As soon as I mentioned ‘Fernando’ he started reliving that day Menendez stuck the probe on his head. Look, Schmidt, Sandy’s shouting ‘Fernando’ in her sleep, and she’s reliving the treatment.

He says this is impossible and you say it is impossible, but I'm telling you, Schmidt, she's reliving those treatments. She wakes me up shouting Fernando's name. What's happening, and what can I do about it?"

Schmidt knew Casimir was no one to patronize. He appeared shocked by this revelation. "I don't understand how this can happen. Oh, maybe from some other doctor who didn't apply the treatment correctly, but from Dr. Grifton?" He hesitated and looked at Casimir, who just stared back at Schmidt. "Nevertheless, if you say this is happening, it must be."

"Doc, please forgive me for raising my voice, but this is terrible. Can I bring her in? Can you help her?"

"I don't know if I can. Bringing her in may only make things worse. I'd have to use the brain probe machine."

"Oh, no! You're not going to do that to her again. You have to do something else."

"There's nothing else to do, Commandant. Some of the memory neurons must have reconnected. There is still so much we don't know, but this is what must be happening. We must have missed some synaptic connections. If there are any buried connections they could resurface in a dream state. This must have been happening with your wife. Once an initial memory comes back, the brain will search for the memory. It will make new connections. The only treatment is with the brain probe."

"Sedratol," Casimir said.

Dr. Schmidt just stared at Casimir with a look of incredulity. "Grifton said that?"

"Nothing else; just Sedratol. What do you know of it?"

"Grifton isn't thinking clearly. Forget what he said."

"It was the only time he did seem lucid, Dr. Schmidt. What did he mean? What is it? If it's something that can help my wife, I want to know."

Schmidt's eyes were downcast. "I helped Fred develop it and conducted the testing myself. It's dangerous and not certified by the FDA for human use. Just forget it, sir."

"Tell me about it—that's an order."

Schmidt just stared at Casimir, and then he stood up and began pacing around the office. Finally, he turned toward Casimir. "It's an inhibitor, and it's very dangerous. We used it on various test animals. It's designed to inhibit the limbic system to reduce dreaming, but without the correct dosage

it can lead to various psychotraumatic illnesses such as PTSD. It may be years before we have all the answers.”

“Could you get it for me?”

“Commandant, I could lose my license for that.”

Casimir just stared at Schmidt. Schmidt knew Casimir had the power to do just what he feared if he didn’t cooperate. “Let me talk to Grifton.”

“I want it now. If Martinez should ever find out about Sandra, he’ll order her back to Hell House or kill her. Anything is better than those alternatives.” Schmidt knew he couldn’t refuse the Commandant.

CHAPTER 17:

TROUBLE AT HELL HOUSE

“Hello, hon.”

(Pause) “Yeah, I’m still in the office. I’ve got to get this research on S-1051 for Trident. I’m already late with it, and I promised him he’d have it on his desk first thing in the morning. I think I’m going to be pulling an all-nighter.”

(Pause) “What’s that?”

(Pause) “Oh, sure. I’ll be home for an early breakfast. Then a quick shower, and back to the office.”

(Pause) “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll take a little catnap.”

“Huh?”

(Pause) “Oh, I don’t know. We got some procedural votes in the afternoon. I’ve got to be here for that. After that I should be able to get home. It depends on how the vote goes. I could be stuck in a meeting. You know how Trident is. He’s always got to have a plan—”

“Huh?”

(Pause) “Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

(Pause) “Sure. Make reservations for us, okay?”

(Pause) “Love you too.”

Senator Everson Moore hung up the phone, opened the spreadsheet, and began entering more numbers; but he couldn’t get his mind off Pamela. He got his pocket phone out. “Gino, any word on those Hogs?”

Moore made a face after Gino filled him in. “Sure.”

(Pause) “What should I tell her?”

(Pause) “Christ! It’s a sort of you’re damned no matter what you do.”

(Pause) “Yeah, I’ll relay those options to Ray. It’s best I let him make the decisions.” He hung up the phone and dialed Ray.

“Ray, it’s Ev. I got some information for you, but it isn’t exactly good news. Any place you go west there’s going to be someone looking for you. They know you’ve switched vehicles, so they’re looking for faces. No

matter where you stop someone's going to see you and report your position to the Hogs."

(Pause) "I know. It's sort of damned no matter what you do."

(Pause) sh"Okay, Ray. Keep me posted."

Ev got back to his spreadsheet, staring at the numbers. He didn't like the answers, but he knew to be thorough. *What if we boosted the variable for commerce? Let's see. About point one.*

He heard a knock at the door that momentarily startled him. "Yes?"

"Janitor."

"I'm rather busy in here."

"It'll only take a minute sir. Just trying to do my job."

Christ, he said to himself. "All right, just a minute."

As Moore opened the door three men burst in. They quickly wrestled him to the ground, put a large piece of tape over his mouth, and tied his hands. They hustled him down the hall quickly and out a service door to a waiting van. He was then blindfolded and taken somewhere. Moore was frightened out of his mind.



"Casimir. It's Al."

"Yes sir. Always good to hear your voice."

"Cut the shit. We're bringing in Senator Everson Moore."

"Who, Al? I don't understand."

"You know—the guy who warned you off Eugene Sulke."

"Was that this guy, Moore?"

"The one and only. He's as much a thorn in our side as yours. Always causing trouble for us and, apparently he's won over the Traffic Committee minority leader; a man named Trident. They're trying to make it easier to get exit visas to travel to Sick America."

"That's very good news, sir."

"We want to use Alt House, and treat Senator Moore."

"Okay, Al. We'll keep it open."

"According to my men in Washington, they're supposed to upgrade their security. We had to act fast, and when we found out Moore would be

working in an empty part of the building...well...we couldn't pass up the opportunity."

"I understand, Al. What do you want me to do with Sulke?"

"Go back to the original plan. Arrest him, stick him in jail, have a trial for co-conspiracy to commit murder, and let him spend a few years in prison. Plenty of time then to put him through Hell House."

"Sure. We can do that, but what about the Blues?"

"We'll find a place for them. Now, where are you at on that prick's capture?"

"We've got him holed up somewhere in the southeastern part of South Dakota. They appear to be moving toward the Canadian border. I've got my best men hunting for them. It shouldn't take long."

"Just make sure they don't make it to Sick America."

"No problem on that end, Al. We've got our men at the Canadian border and we have a network of volunteers in Montana in case they go that way. It's just a matter of time sir."

"Keep me posted."



"Senator Trident, Linda Gomez, a Senate page, wants to talk to you."

"I really don't have time. I can't find Moore, and I don't have any research on S-1051."

After a few minutes the secretary came back in. "I'm sorry, Senator Trident, but this woman won't go away. She says she has important information for you."

"Very well. Show her in."

"Senator Trident, Senator Moore was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes sir. Last night."

"Have you called the police?"

"Yes, sir, but I don't think they believed me. You see, I was cleaning Senator Dickens' office last night. He had me running a bunch of errands. It was around ten o'clock last night that I heard a shout and some commotion a few doors down from where I was. I opened the door a crack and I could

hear voices and a muffled sound. Then I saw three men taking Senator Moore out the service door. That's all I know."

"And you reported this to the police?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why do you think they don't believe you?"

"They asked me if I was positive it was the Senator. I said I didn't see his face, but they came out of his prep office. They said they'd take care of it. I spent the whole night waiting for them to come, and no police came. Then I waited for you to get here."

"Okay, thank you. We'll take it from here."

After the page left, Trident's secretary looked at him. "What do you think, Senator? Why haven't the police come? Do you think Senator Moore really was kidnapped?"

"I'm going to take a look in his office."

Moore's prep office was just four doors down from his. Moore's secretary was already there.

"There you are, Senator Trident," Trina, Moore's secretary, said. "I got here about a half hour ago and I can't find Senator Moore. He's been working here. He must have been here all night. He's got a word processor and spreadsheet program open, his coffee cup's still here, but no Senator Moore."

"A page heard a commotion last night. She claims the senator was kidnapped."

Trina gasped, holding her hands up to her face. "What do we do, Senator?"

"The police are on the way. Take the rest of the day off."

Trident alerted building security, which conducted a thorough investigation, and alerted D.C. police, who finally came and did its own investigation; but it went nowhere. Moore had simply vanished.



"Hello."

"Dr. Schmidt, it's Horace Hayfield. My customers are starting to remember."

"Hold it, Hayfield. Your name is familiar, but—"

“You sold me the machine and gave me training.”

“Oh yeah, yeah. Well, what’s the problem?”

“I just told you the problem,” Hayfield said in a deep southern drawl. Hayfield spoke slowly and deliberately. “My customers are starting to remember. I’ve been getting’ calls from parents for a week now about how their little angels are talking in their sleep, and waking up crying. What the hell is going on?”

“How many have you treated, and how many are starting to remember?”

“Hold on a sec. I’ve got that right...yes, here it is. I’ve had thirty-seven kids come in for treatment and seven are rememberin’. Now you told me this was impossible.”

“Impossible if you did the procedure correctly.”

“I did the procedure correctly. I did it exactly as you taught me, and they’re rememberin’. What the hell is going on?”

“Mr. Cornfield...”

“HAYFIELD!”

“Yeah...uh...Hayfield. It is critical that you disconnect all the neurons in the medial temporal lobe at the bright red image in the cerebral cortex. If you’ve done the brain scan correctly, this will be the activity of the latest probe. You must cut these connections through the ‘dialing down’ process.”

“Yes, yes. I know. You taught me all this during my training.”

“Yes, I know, but it is equally important you understand the process perfectly. Now, what is happening to the individual neurons is that you are blocking the receptor cells. This is only temporary. They still have memory of the pain since other neurons are involved here. As you finish the synaptic treatments you have to further treat the closed connections so that the synapse is weakened. Then, over time, the unused connections completely sever. If you’ve done the procedure correctly, they can’t ever remember. As time goes by the chance of remembering is reduced further until that memory is completely gone.”

“Look, doc, I don’t want to sound like a pain in the ass, but these kids are rememberin’, and I did the procedure precisely as you told me to. Furthermore, I’ve maintained a log of precisely what I did, and when I did it. Those kids left my tough love camp cured of bad behavior. Now, I’ve got parents talking about suin’ me and shuttin’ down my camps.”

“I’ll admit that there is a small chance of remembrance even if the procedure was done correctly, but there shouldn’t be any cognitive recognition of the treatment. It is just some echo of the treatment from the non-cognitive functions of the brain. I’ll talk to Dr. Grifton, and get back to you.”

This seemed to satisfy Hayfield for the time being, but Schmidt was worried. He gave Grifton a nootropic, and they sat down at a conference table. Grifton seemed to stabilize on a steady diet of nootropics that both doctors perfected.

“Fred, more patients are complaining of remembering their treatments. That Hayfield character was telling me that some of his customers are threatening a lawsuit because their sons and daughters are dreaming of the treatment. Have you thought any more about this?”

“There had to be something we missed,” Grifton said. “We know that the brain has a way of storing the same memory in different locations. If the neural connections aren’t blocked immediately after treatments, the very thought of the treatments create retrocognition.”

“The point is, Fred, what can we do about it? Further treatment is probably out of the question. According to Commandant Casimir, Sedratol prevented the memories of the treatments from Sandra’s dreams.”

“Yes, the dreams are a problem. When the person wakes up from a memory dream, and starts thinking about the dream, it could result in retrocognition. Sedratol is the only answer.”

“We can’t give him that. He’ll screw it up, and then his ‘little angels’ will really have problems. I have to tell Hayfield something. If I don’t, he’ll turn around and sue us. Casimir, not to mention Martinez, isn’t going to like that. That will mean trouble for us.”

“Couldn’t we give him a low enough dosage—call it a mild sedative?”

“But what dosage? That’s the problem, Fred.”

Schmidt could see that Grifton was having trouble concentrating again and didn’t answer. He looked troubled. “It’s okay, Fred. Get some rest now.”



“Sandy is missing,” Casimir said.

“For how long?” Captain Miller asked.

“I don’t know precisely. She wasn’t home when I got back to the house from work. There was no note. I stayed up most of the night waiting for her, and still no Sandy. I’m at my wit’s end. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll issue an all-Squad alert, Commandant. Don’t worry, we’ll find her.”



Eugene, Pamela, Ray, and Cassandra were in a motel room in northwest Minnesota. With the Hogs looking for them north and west, the four felt their best move was to go northeast, deeper into Minnesota. Retracing their steps was ruled out because they could be trapped. Moving to Minnesota gave them an opportunity to escape to Canada, but that would be difficult now that Pamela’s contact in Washington hadn’t responded to her call. The four gathered in Pamela’s room, around a round table in the sitting room.

“How’s our money?” Eugene asked.

“We’re fine on that end,” Pamela said.

“What about you guys?” Eugene asked, addressing Ray and Cassandra.

“Not good. We won’t have enough money to make it all the way there,” Ray said.

“Don’t worry,” Pamela said. “If you can get us out of this mess, I’ll pay you. If you can’t, then money is your least problem.”

They all laughed.

“Anyone have a plan?” Pamela asked.

“For now, we’re going to have to hang out in Minnesota for a while,” Ray said. “We need help. It’s the unknown that’s our biggest enemy.”

“I know this may sound a bit reckless,” Cassandra said, “but maybe we should let the Hogs know where we are. We could ambush them. I’ve got three more clips—more than thirty rounds, and I know you got at least two more clips.”

“No, Cass,” Ray said.

“Ray, we’ve been in worse jams before. Remember, I took out three Squad members in a matter of seconds.”

“You really want to hang that one on your resume, Cass?”

“You’re never going to let me off the hook on that one, are you?”

“Sorry, Cass. I said we’d forget it and that’s that. But what you’re forgetting is that those guys were regulars. These guys are Blues. They aren’t going to walk into a trap, and they’re not going to be ambushed. If we had Armstrong, or a couple of his men, like Wrenn or Foote, then maybe it’d work, but it’s way too risky. What we have to do is wait for information. Ev hasn’t returned my last call either. In the meantime, we should be safe. We’ll just hold out here, and then figure out what to do.”

All four were satisfied, but it was an uneasy satisfaction. Eugene got up to turn on the television. “The news comes on at five. Anyone mind if I turn it on?” No one objected.

“Our top story tonight is the bizarre situation surrounding the Tough Love Camp run by Horace Hayfield. A young boy treated for aggressive behavior tells a shocking story of torture at that camp. Kayla Tucker has the story.”

“Tonya, we’re at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Savena in Mayfield, Ohio, whose son, Jeffrey, went to the Tough Love Camp, and

has made some rather bizarre statements. Mr. Savena, can you tell us what your son said?”

“Well, Kayla, first he kept complaining of bad dreams. He’d wake up screaming, and then he told us he was tortured with a pen that had wires hanging out of it.”

“And do you believe this had something to do with the tough love camp?”

“My boy said the camp gave him bad headaches.”

“Like migraines?”

“Worse,” Mrs. Savena said. “It was really bad. He’d wake up saying, ‘mommy it hurts.’ And then he’d start crying.’”

“Did he seem fine before he went to the camp?”

“Yes,” Mr. Savena said. “He never complained of headaches before.”

“What would you like to see happen?”

“We want that camp shut down.”

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Savena.”

“Kayla, this is Tonya Cummings. Can the family provide any other details about what was going on in the camp?”

“Tonya, the children say they can’t remember much of anything at the camp. At this time the children only complained of bad dreams they were having, but all

report terrible headaches caused by the use of some object being reported as pens, sticks, fingers, and pokers.”

“Thank you for that report, Kayla.”

“That son of a bitch!” Eugene yelled. “I remembered that commercial that guy was running. I remembered it seemed exactly like what was happening to me in that torture chamber I was in. My God, they’re doing this to kids.”

“And they’re remembering,” Ray said.

“This could be bad news for us,” Cassandra said.

“I don’t understand,” Pamela said.

“If their attempt to manipulate how people think and act becomes a colossal failure,” Ray said, “in the sense that it comes out they’re torturing people, and then trying to erase peoples’ memory of it...well...it could spur widespread rebellion. The people who started this, probably NSA or CIA, are going to do everything they can to cover this up. Because Eugene experienced the camp, they may fear he could leak out details of his experience. Our lives are in danger.”

Just then, Pamela’s phone rang. She looked for the caller. “It’s Moore,” she said, in excitement toward the others. “Hello, Senator Moore.”

“Thank you for answering, Pamela,” a strange voice said. “Stay right there and someone will be there to help you.” Pamela quickly hung up.

“What is it?” Eugene said.

“They have Moore.” She repeated the message. “Could they find us?”

“It’s possible,” Ray said, “but it may also be a trap to flush us out.”

“We gotta move,” Pamela said.

“I agree,” both Ray and Cassandra said.



Casimir's phone rang. "Casimir, things are spinning out of control," Alberto Martinez said. "That Hayseed or Haystack, whatever the fuck his name is, just exposed our machine to the general public. Jesus Christ, who the hell sold him that thing?"

"The Institute," Casimir said. "I didn't know about it either until I saw his infomercial. I found out he bought the machine and the training to use it for a million dollars."

"It cost over a billion dollars to develop it, and this asshole buys it for a thousandth of that amount?"

"Grifton and Schmidt saw an opportunity to make a profit on it, and then leave the country, is my guess. They're both gone now. I've been trying to call them with no answer. I went down there, and the doors were locked. Finally, one of the technicians answered and he told me all that I told you."

"Christ, what a mess," Martinez said. "I want you to put an all-Squad on this. Find those two assholes and bring them back. I want them alive. As for our four fugitives—get rid of them permanently; especially Sulke. We have a lead on them. We know they're in a motel in western Minnesota."

"How did you find that out?"

"We got Moore's cell phone with a hot line to Pamela Piper. Once she answers the phone, we get her GPS."

"Isn't her phone encrypted?"

"Senator Moore gave us the password. He was very cooperative, and we were very persuasive."

"Does Piper know she was being tracked?"

"Moore says he never told her about a tracking device inside the phone, but she may be on the move. Look, we have to act fast. You got a pen and paper?"

"Yeah."

"Here are their coordinates. Let the Hogs know, and let me know when you got them. Then have the Hogs take them out."



“Captain Miller, you may go in now.”

“John, sit down,” Jaydan Casimir said.

“I’m sorry to report, Jay; still no info on your wife.”

“I know. I called you in because she cleaned out a CD with twenty-five grand in it. I don’t know why she did that, but it’s apparent to me now that she’s put the pieces together. She told me she wasn’t having any more bad dreams, but I think she was lying to me. I think she was remembering, just like those kids. She probably picked up bits and pieces of the truth, connected the dots, and left me.”

“My wife told me that she mentioned she knew about Hell House. She said you told her about it.”

“That would be the last thing I’d mention.”

“Any idea where she might have gone?”

“She may be looking for Fernando.”

“Fer...who?”

“We put him through the brain probe, but he went nuts, killed a guard, knocked out the doctor, and then used the probe on himself until he died from the shock.”

“And you think Sandy knows this guy, and is looking for him?”

“She was married to him before Hell House. She may have figured that out. I don’t know where else she’d go. It’s also possible she went to some motel or hotel until she cools off. Look, John, check the hotels in the area. If you find her, treat her gently. I suppose she has a right to be sore.”

“Where would she go to find Fernando?”

“She may have found his address, or remembered where she used to live. In any event, here’s the address we have on file.” Casimir paused to write it down. “He was also in Joliet for not paying back a loan. She may go there asking a lot of questions. Make sure Hank keeps his mouth shut. If he creates a problem for you, just tell him to call me.”

“I understand, Jay. Don’t worry, sir. We’ll find her.”

CHAPTER 18: FLIGHT

Thirty Hours Earlier:

Sandy woke up around two in the morning and heard Jaydan snoring. She climbed out of bed as quietly as she could, tiptoed over to where her husband hung his pants up, and fished around for his keys. She removed them as quietly as possible and grabbed her phone from the dresser; then tiptoed downstairs, and into the den. She found the key that opened the desk drawers, and searched.

She wasn't sure she knew what to look for, but she was certain she would know it if she saw it. After several minutes she found a letter from Mercy Psychiatric Institute with a reference to Operation Brain Probe. There was a name on it: Dr. Johann Schmidt, Chief Executive Officer of Mercy Psychiatric Institute. There was another reference to Frederick Grifton, Chief of Psychiatry.

She took a picture of the letter with her phone, and then, a few minutes later, she found another letter from the Institute. She read it verbatim.

Dear Dr. Schmidt:

The equipment and training
my client, Horace Hayfield,
received have resulted in
unusual outcomes among his

clientele. Such outcomes have resulted in a growing list of complaints concerning the defective service they have received. As a result, we are demanding the return of one million dollars for the purchase of the defective equipment and eleven million dollars to cover legal costs associated with the use of said equipment. We will, of course, return such equipment to you. Should you not comply with our request, we will have no other recourse but to take you to court. I am looking forward to your response in a timely manner.

Yours,

F. Thomas Taylor
F. Thomas Taylor
Attorney-at-Law

Sandy took a picture of the document. She continued the search. Then she found another letter addressed to her husband, and read it.

Dear Commandant Jaydan
Casimir:

At your request, we have
dismissed charges against
Sandra Menendez for
embezzlement. She will be
released at twelve noon on
Wednesday, June 13.

Yours Truly,

H.P. Wilcox
H.P. Wilcox
Warden, Joliet Prison

Once again, Sandy took a picture of the document, and searched some more. From the same file folder she found an even more shocking letter.

Dear Commandant Jaydan
Casimir:

We are pleased to report to you that Fernando Menendez has signed the divorce papers that Sandra Menendez served on her husband. The signing was at the urging of Sandra Menendez herself. Judge Brier Thompson has accepted the papers, and announced the marriage dissolved. You are now free to take Miss Sandra Montgomery as your wife. Congratulations, sir.

Yours Truly,

Hector Ortiz
Hector Ortiz
Attorney-at-Law

Sandy began crying as she took the picture.

She found several more letters similar to this. One was a letter from Dr. Grifton, informing Mr. Martinez that a brain probe treatment was successful. Other letters indicated various problems with the procedure.

There could be no doubt now in Sandy's mind that she went through the brain probe treatment. Her memories of a good life with Fernando Menendez were erased from her mind, and replaced by false memories of falling in love with Jaydan Casimir, and agreeing to marry him. *What do I do now? Confront Jay or run away?*

She went back upstairs after she carefully replaced everything and relocked the drawers. She then replaced the keys in Jay's pocket and climbed into bed.

"Where'd you go, dear?" Jay asked.

Sandy was startled. "I was having trouble sleeping and took the sedative you got for me."

"What did you need my keys for?"

"What?"

"I heard a little jangling like keys."

"It was just some change I found in the bathroom. I just put it in the change drawer."

A couple hours later Jay woke up, worried, and walked downstairs into the study. He stood over the desk, looking down, and stared. He was frowning.



The next morning there was no mention of keys, and Jay went to work as usual. Sandy put the plan she came up with into action. She knew she had to

work fast.

She took the bus to their bank and withdrew twenty-five thousand dollars, and then took another ten grand from her credit card. Then she took a cab to Mercy Psychiatric Institute, where she asked to see Dr. Schmidt.

“May I get your name please?” the secretary asked.

“My name is Sandra Casimir, the wife of Commandant Jaydan Casimir.”

The secretary called his boss.

“Go right in Mrs. Casimir.”

She knocked and entered Dr. Schmidt’s office.

“Hello, Mrs. Casimir. Please take a seat,” he said cheerfully. “What can I do for you?”

“Dr. Schmidt I’d like to know more about who I was?”

“Who you were?” Dr. Schmidt asked as if he was expecting the punchline.

“You know I went through the procedure, right?”

“Procedure, Mrs. Casimir?”

“Please don’t patronize me. About a month ago I started having strange dreams. Initially, they were nightmares of being in some sort of clinic with a lot of wires, something on my head, and a stick that caused enormous pain. One more thing—a name: Fernando.”

“Your husband told me about some strange dreams, but they are not that uncommon. Are you still taking the sedative I prescribed for you? You didn’t stop taking it did you?”

“I never did take it.”

“Mrs. Casimir—”

“Please don’t interrupt me. Allow me to continue.” She paused, and Casimir motioned for her to carry on.

“Thank you. What I was about to say was that I was beginning to have flashbacks.”

“Flashbacks, Mrs. Casimir? Could you explain?”

“It’s hard to explain. Something would flash in my mind. Maybe something in my dream I had forgotten. Anyway, I had this one flashback of a signature on some document that I know now was a divorce paper. The signature read ‘Fernando Menendez’. There appeared to be tear stains. I just remembered that now. Anyway, I had a last name and I did some research at the library and—”

“Why are you telling me this, Mrs. Casimir?”

“The treatment doesn’t work, and you know it,” she said sharply. “I’ve seen copies of letters in my husband’s desk. You’re being sued, right?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Casimir, but I’m not at liberty to discuss this, and, being rather busy, I’m afraid I’ll have to end this conversation.”

He got up to thank her for coming, but Sandy didn’t move. “Sit down, doctor. We have more to discuss.”

Dr. Schmidt was taken aback. Sandy was very serious, and she wasn’t about to move.

“Please, Mrs. Casimir. I cannot talk about this. My lawyer said so.” Still, Sandy refused to move.

“Sit, Doctor.”

Dr. Schmidt did so, and motioned for Sandy to continue.

“They’re going to shut down the Institute and arrest you. They’ll go after Dr. Grifton as well. You may not want to discuss this with me, but you must. You know I’m right.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they’, Mrs. Casimir?”

“The people who fund the project. I don’t know the specifics. I don’t know who they are, but I saw the name of someone who appeared to be behind this project. His name is Alberto Martinez.”

Dr. Schmidt went ashen, and a look of surprise came over his face, which he quickly tried to hide. Sandy took notice, and continued like a prosecutor.

“I believe the purpose is to change the behavior and character of people into whatever this Martinez guy wants. I believe they can change political dissidents, who are perceived as a danger to the nation, into good American Party enthusiasts.”

Dr. Schmidt looked downcast. He had no idea she could know so much, realizing she had been right about everything.

“I also know that, at the request of my husband, I was removed from jail and given the treatment. I don’t truly understand why I was in jail, but I underwent treatment to remove pleasant memories of my original husband, Fernando Menendez, and convinced him to divorce me. Today, however, I have only bits and pieces of a life with him. Those bits and pieces, Dr. Schmidt, were of a loving man. Now, does that square with what you know?—AND DON’T PATRONIZE ME. I want the truth, and I’m not

going home to Commandant Casimir. I want out of here. I want to go to New America.”

Dr. Schmidt looked down again, frowning. Then he nodded in agreement. “All you have said is true, but getting out of here is impossible. They’ll catch us, and then things will be worse.”

“I have an idea. There is a woman, Pamela Piper, who has been taking persecuted people to New America. I don’t know anything about her except she can get people out of the United States for a fee of twenty-five thousand dollars, and I think, with your help, we can find her.” She paused and looked at Schmidt.

“She is the sister of Redd Piper,” he said. “He’s the founder of New America. I’m sorry, but I don’t know where she is.”

“Please, Dr. Schmidt. You know more than you’re admitting. Tell me what you know about her. Any information could help us get in contact with her.”

“She’s escorting a man out of the country to New America. The whole Squad, not to mention the RAC, is looking for them. If that’s not bad enough, a motorcycle gang called the Hogs is looking for them as well. They’re ex-Blue Squaders, the squad’s best. There is, I’ve heard, a million dollar bounty on her and her company.” Sandy gasped.

“It gets worse, though, I’m afraid. She’s been relying on help from a government informer—a Senator Moore. He’s been kidnapped and is being held in a secure location, waiting for treatment. I know the doctor who’s going to do the treatment.”

“Is he in Hell House?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where this place—Hell House—is?”

“Yes.”

“Then, if we can get him out of there, he can contact Mrs. Piper, right?”

“Even if I could rescue that senator, the phone he uses to contact Pamela Piper is useless now.”

“What do you mean?”

“They already called her. Not being very experienced, they blurted out the fact that they got her location.”

“Then you know where she is?”

“That senator would know where she was.”

Sandra looked confused.

“You see, they coerced the senator into giving his kidnappers the use of his private phone. Someone used it to call her and let out that they know exactly where she’s at.”

“Still, if we can rescue that senator he could get in contact with her.”

“She might not answer.”

“She might. We need her help—you as much as I.”

Schmidt gulped, and looked to be deep in thought. He took a deep breath and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Look, I know you have money, and you have a lot of it—what was that figure? Oh, yes a million dollars, wasn’t it?”

Schmidt looked gobsmacked. “Are you suggesting we hire somebody to kidnap Moore and bring him to us?”

“You said you know where he’s being held, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you known there?”

Schmidt nodded. “I could get in.”

“That money you have would buy a lot of favors wouldn’t it?”

He thought a moment and then nodded. “Do you have a place to go?”

“No.”

“You can stay at my place. I’ll give you my key, and I’ll have someone drive you there. You’ll be safe until I can figure out what to do.”

“Thank you.”



Less than an hour later, Schmidt and Grifton were on their way to Alt House. “Fred, do you understand why we’re doing this?”

“You want me to treat Moore.”

“No. I need you to concentrate. This is very important. I’m going to say I am going to do a brain analysis of Moore because time is of the essence, and we can’t wait for the other doctor to get here. But it’s just a ruse, Fred. We’re going to rescue Moore. The word will go out anytime now that he is to be killed. They don’t trust the machine anymore, and if they don’t trust the machine, they don’t trust us. We must all get out now.”

Grifton looked perplexed. “Not trust the brain probe?”

“This is what I told you at the Institute. People are dreaming about the clinic. When they wake up they reflect on their dreams. When they do this —”

“Yes, yes I know—retrocognition.”

“They’re remembering, Fred. Sandra Casimir has already figured it out. The press is talking about it. NOGOV will pressure them to shut up, but independents will continue talking about it over the internet. NOGOV will shut down the program and kill all those connected with it; then clamp down on the news. When that’s done, they’ll start a reverse-news campaign to spread misinformation, calling all those who talk about torture chambers by the government, crackpots and conspiracy nuts. It may take them awhile, but they’ll succeed. We may not have more than a day or two before the Squad, under NOGOV orders, comes after us.”

There was silence for a few minutes, and then Grifton spoke up. “I know how we can fix the remembering problem.”

“Sedratol,” Schmidt said.

“Yes, I told you about it.”

“I know, Fred, but it doesn’t help us now. They’re already remembering. Remember Hayfield? His clients are starting to remember. Now he wants his money back, and wants to sue us for millions. NOGOV will never allow something like this to go to court. They’ll hunt him down, scare the bejesus out of him, and if that doesn’t do any good, they’ll kill him.”

Grifton looked confused.

“Fred, I need you to concentrate.” He repeated the plan. “You know what to do now when we get there?”

Grifton still appeared confused; Schmidt went over the plan again, and Grifton was made to repeat it. He got parts of it wrong. Schmidt corrected him. He repeated the plan one more time, and quizzed Grifton about it. This time he got it right; just as they reached Alt House.

Schmidt knocked on the door. A guard opened the spy hole, saw them, and then opened the door. “Dr. Schmidt and Dr. Grifton. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Sorry no one let you know we were coming, but Dr. McCardell will be delayed another day. A brain analysis needs to be done right away.”

“Oh, good. Come right in.”

“How many guards are here?” Schmidt asked.

“Just me and Jesus.”

“Good. Once we start the treatment Casimir will order more security.”

“Oh, yeah. They already worked out the plans.”

“Let’s go downstairs and get Moore. I want to get started right away.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Grifton stayed up and engaged the other guard in conversation while Schmidt and the first guard went to the basement. The guard unlocked the cell, and took Moore over to the metal chair.

“Secure his arms, guard.” He did so as Schmidt shot him.

Upstairs, the other guard was startled. “Homer?” As Jesus started for the stairs, Grifton then shot him. A startled Everson Moore yelled. Schmidt assured him he was here to rescue him, and then released his shackles.

“The phone,” Moore said. Schmidt grabbed it, hurried him upstairs, and the three got in Schmidt’s Dodge Durango. They sped off for Schmidt’s home.



“Sandy,” Schmidt said, “this is Dr. Grifton, the inventor of the brain probe, and this is Senator Everson Moore. We won’t have much time. We killed two guards in the rescue of Moore. It will take the Squad time to figure out who did it, so we have to make the best use of it to figure out how to meet up with Pamela Piper.”

“Dr. Grifton?” Sandy said, a bit unsure of things.

“Hello,” Grifton said, equally unsure.

“Did you do a treatment on me?”

“No,” Schmidt said, lying. “Neither one of us did.”

“I’m glad,” Sandy said. “I don’t think I could go anywhere with someone who destroyed my life.”

“YOU WERE TREATED!” Grifton shouted.

“Fred! You must apologize to Mrs. Casimir.” Grifton looked confused.

“There was an accident at the clinic. Dr. Grifton suffered a mental breakdown.” Schmidt thought it better not to go into any details. Sandy seemed unimpressed.

“The important thing is to get out of here. So let’s focus on that.”

“I have Pamela Piper’s cell phone,” Ev Moore said, “but thanks to that security guard, I don’t suppose she’ll answer it.”

“Can you leave a message?” Sandy asked.

“Yes, but she may not believe it’s me. That guard scared her off because he revealed that he could get their position from the GPS in her phone. I was coerced into revealing the encrypted code.”

Grifton sat down, apart from the others. His mind was still confused, and Schmidt knew he’d be of little help.

“Senator Moore—”

“Please call me Ev. It’s what people closest to me call me. May I call my wife? She’s got to be frantic.”

“Of course.”

He and his wife talked for almost an hour. Meanwhile, it gave Schmidt more time to think. By the time Moore hung up he had the semblance of a plan, but he would need Moore’s help.

“My wife and I are flying to New America,” Moore said. “We made sure we still had exit visas. Government officials are the only ones allowed to go right now. I wish I could take you guys, but it’s impossible. She’s flying in and she’ll be at the airport at six tomorrow morning. I’ll take a cab to O’Hare now, if you don’t mind.”

“Ev,” Dr. Schmidt said. “If you consent to help us now, I’ll drive you to the airport myself.”

“What can I do? Contact with Pamela Piper appears to be out of the question.”

“Do you know anyone else who can help us?”

Moore nodded. “Have you heard of Raymond O’Reilly?”

“Dennis O’Reilly’s brother?”

“That’s the one.”

“Sure, I’ve heard of him. He and his wife are a couple of bad asses.”

“He and his wife are assisting Pamela while she escorts her charge to New America. He won’t answer this phone either, but he has another number that he occasionally uses. I think I can get the number off the phone, but it will take me a little while.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d try,” answered Schmidt.

“This phone is used by the NSA, and it has a way of gathering phone calls made from another phone. However, retrieving that information involves a good deal of searching, and matching that number with the owner of that number. When I find a match it lights up in green.”

It took Moore almost an hour, but he found it. Moore dialed the number. Ray answered. "Ray, this is Senator Everson Moore. I've escaped from that Hell House. Drs. Grifton and Schmidt rescued me, and they need your help."

There was a pause. "Are you there, Ray?"

"Senator, how did you get this number?"

"Occasionally, NSA phone hacking can be useful."

"Hang on, Senator."

After another pause, "Ev? Is it really you?"

"Yes, Pamela. I've escaped from Hell House. Well, I was rescued by Drs.—"

"I know. Ray told me. Where are you?"

"I'm at the home of Dr. Schmidt."

"We want to help you," Schmidt said, grabbing the phone. "We have money. We can bring security in return for allowing us to go with you."

"Give me a minute, doctor."

"Dr. Schmidt?" Ray O'Reilly said.

"Yes."

"Dr. Schmidt, I need Chad Armstrong, but he costs a lot of money. We may be talking in excess of twenty grand plus travel costs. He's the only one who's a match for the Hogs."

"What's your situation?"

"We're about fifty miles south of the Canadian border, in western Minnesota, traveling east. I believe the Hogs are guarding all the roads leading into Canada. They're probably behind us and maybe to our south. A confrontation at some point is probably unavoidable."

"How do I reach Armstrong?"

"He won't answer your call. I'll call my cousin. He can arrange everything. Hold on."

"Ev," Schmidt said. "What's their best plan of action?"

"They can't continue to travel east more than two hundred miles. They'll enter Roseau County and that's RAC territory. It may be the Hogs' plan. Force them in a situation where they can be easily captured. I wish I could be of more help."

"Dr. Schmidt?" Ray said.

"Yes, I'm here."

“Armstrong told me he’d help me for a flat fifteen G fee—cash, of course. When he gets me out of our jam I’ll send for you.”

“There are three of us. The third is a woman who has the fee for Pamela. Okay?”

“The more the merrier, I guess,” Ray said. “Look, in return for assisting in your escape, you are to use the cash to pay Armstrong. Bring the money in cash, and rendezvous with my cousin, Sean. I’ll give you his address.”

“That sounds like close to the Wisconsin border.”

“That’s right. Call me when the transaction is made. I’ll need to talk to Armstrong.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Schmidt said. “Senator Moore says you can’t enter Roseau Country. It’s about 200 miles to your east. It’s RAC territory.”

“Okay, thanks, but we should be fine here where we’ll wait for Armstrong.”

As he hung up, Schmidt turned to Moore. “Thank you for your help. I’ll take you to the airport now.”

“Thank you for the rescue. Oh, and one more thing. The same guard who blabbed to Pamela about coming for them, also blabbed to me about one more thing.”

“What’s that?” Schmidt said.

“You better leave right away because the order has already been sent to bring you two back.”

“They know where we live. That’s no secret.”

“I think you all should take me to the airport, and pack everything you’ll need because you can’t afford to come back.”

CHAPTER 19:

A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

The four wayfarers stopped at a Hamburger Heaven restaurant, and grabbed a table to sit down and enjoy a meal. Eugene got the all-American dinner: quarter-pounder, large fries, and a large coke. Pamela went for the salad, and Cassandra grabbed a fish sandwich. Ray chowed down on the double beef “heartattack”.

They ate quietly until Cassandra spoke. “Hey Pamela, tell me something almost no one would know about New America.”

She didn’t hesitate. “I’ll tell you two things: there’s no sales tax on anything, and they did away with the penny. Nothing costs nine ninety-nine anymore. It’s ten bucks.”

They all laughed.

“Why do you have to buy your job?” Eugene asked. “It’s pretty much all co-ops, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“So why don’t you buy your way into the co-op? Isn’t that the way it’s supposed to work?”

“In many cases it does. Buying your job is an option to buying a position in a cooperative.”

“How does that work?” Ray asked.

“It was my brother’s idea. His first employees didn’t have the money to buy their way into the cooperatives he set up, so he depended on billionaire investors when he set up his large industrial cooperatives. Many of them were the size of an entire city, with several hundred thousand workers. Redd could move them around as needed. Today, these independent contractors have their own cooperative. They go to wherever they’re needed, and their cooperative negotiates their payment. It’s great for special jobs where you might need a machinist specializing in a certain product. If they can’t use a specialist full time, they utilize the special hire. The benefit

to the freelancer is that they enjoy the benefits of the co-op they belong to, and typically earn more money.”

“Professor Zinney,” Eugene said, “said these worker-owners would eventually buy their way into the cooperative while the original investors would earn their money back when the labor bought their shares in the co-op from them.”

“What I don’t understand,” said Cassandra, “is what stops them from building a corporate empire of their own so they don’t have to divest themselves from anything, much less share profits with anyone?”

“I’m sure that’s illegal,” Ray said.

“No! Actually, it isn’t,” Pamela answered.

“You mean the same bastards that destroyed Old America could do the same to New America? I don’t believe it,” Ray said.

“A few tried, but they failed. They didn’t have the clout they had in Old America where they could destroy the cooperatives. They tried replacing them with democratic corporations. They gave workers a say in management, and did away with layoffs. The workers had a vote in any strategic decisions management wanted, but it didn’t work.”

“Yeah, professor Zinney told his class about it,” Eugene said. “The university allowed him to teach the history of cooperatives in Old America and the formation of New America as history. He said it collapsed. Once labor decisions threatened profits, management simply rigged the system to make sure they’d always have the votes.”

“Sounds like Old American government,” Ray said. “Once they control the media and education they can control the message. Control the message and everyone votes the way they want them to, even if the people think they’re making the decisions for themselves.”

“Exactly!” Cassandra said. “They think they still have democracy, still have choice, but if the only message you hear is the one the rich and powerful want you to hear, then you end up voting for their program.”

“It’s how totalitarianism works,” Eugene said. “Control all aspects of communication, limit the power of the opposition, but don’t get rid of it completely—”

“That way there is the illusion of choice,” Ray said. “First, create laws that negatively affect the voters, then there will be opposition to those laws; then the law is repealed or fails in the first place. The voters think this is

democracy, but what they didn't understand was that the leadership never wanted that law in the first place."

"Huh," Pamela said incredulously.

Ray just smiled. "Take welfare, for example. NOGOV doesn't want it, so they pressure government to increase taxes that the Middle Class bears the brunt of. The taxes pay for welfare. The Middle Class hates this arrangement and pressures government to get rid of welfare; believing the taxes go away. Maybe it does or maybe they're used to pay for something else they want to get rid of."

"It's all a racket," said Cassandra.

"What happens is that there is less money in circulation to buy things —"

"And when that happens," said Pamela, "everything falls apart."

Ray nodded in agreement. "Less demand, less supply. For the rich, it means everything costs more. They have to use more of their wealth to pay for things that used to be so cheap."

"Is that why they have a problem with electricity even in the Fortress?" Eugene asked.

"Exactly!" Ray said. "First, they have to build their own generators at enormous cost, and then it's costlier than ever to get fuel. Although fuel is cheap these days, it's very expensive to have it shipped to the Fortress."

"Could this happen in New America too, Pamela?" Eugene asked. "I mean could corporations rise again, rig the system, and kill off the economy?"

"No, not at all. The Constitution has provisions to make totalitarianism virtually impossible, but that doesn't explain why corporations don't do well there. They fail because labor gravitates toward the cooperatives. They get better pay, because they can vote on that, and they get a share of the profits. They can plow that share into the cooperative itself, become an owner, and get even a bigger share. Corporations just can't compete. Generally, corporations only exist in certain areas where cooperative jobs are hard to find."

The group continued discussing life on the other side, but Ray had more on his mind. Chad Armstrong said he'd meet them in this parking lot in twelve hours, and that was ten hours ago. It would be a long two hours because he didn't know if Armstrong would get here before the Hogs would.



“Thanks for coming, Beverly,” Jaydan Casimir said.

“How are you holding up, Jay?” she asked.

“Not very well. I’m frantic. You want a drink?”

She made a face, and Jaydan realized it was only nine in the morning.

“How about a cup of coffee?”

“Love it.”

Jaydan made the coffee and fixed himself a drink. He didn’t much care what hour of the day it was. Beverly just smiled.

“You keep her company often, right?” Casimir said.

“I come over about once a week. She keeps me company too. We’re a couple of lonely housewives. I don’t have any close friends. People...you know...get fearful around me. They tend not to open up to me.”

“Why?”

“You know....” She stopped in mid-thought, wondering how to put it. Jaydan just stared at her, not comprehending what she was holding back.

“People are afraid that whatever they tell me would go straight to John. Then—”

“Oh, I understand,” Jaydan said. “I guess it’s a hazard of the job. The job is tough enough on us, but I guess I never realized how tough it is on the wives.” Casimir never told Beverly about Sandy’s “treatment”. That was a heavily guarded secret. Sandy was sort of programmed to accept not just her relationship with Jaydan Casimir, but to see the loneliness of the marriage as perfectly natural.

“You want to know if she said anything about leaving.”

“Yes. Did she? If she did, please don’t let promises between girlfriends stop you from telling me.”

“No promises, and no information about leaving, either. I doubt she’d tell me given...well, you know.”

“Of course. I figured as much, but did she give you any sort of clue? Did she ever mention the name, Fernando?”

“Well,” she hesitated, “she did mention his name in a dream she had.”

“Did she say anything else about her dreams?”

“Just something about connecting dots.”



It was 2:45 p.m. when a black late model Chevy Suburban pulled into the parking lot. It was Armstrong. He was running about a half-hour late, and Ray was relieved to see him.

“Hey, bro,” Chad Armstrong said to Ray O’Reilly. Cassandra came out and hugged him. “Boy, are we glad to see you.” Armstrong smiled. “Okay, guys, tell me what’s going on.” Ray explained how he expected a confrontation with the Hogs soon. He couldn’t be absolutely sure they didn’t know where they were or what they were driving. “It’s an eerie feeling, Chad. I just feel like they’re toying with us. Now I know what a blind person feels like. Stay in your house, you’re fine. You know where everything is. Go outside, and who knows?” “What you need is to find out where they are; and you can bet it isn’t just the Hogs, it’s the Lightning Squad too.” “I don’t know where they are. I only know they’re out there, and they want to capture or kill us.” “My plan is to let them find us. I got Foote, Wrenn, and Bones with me. With you and Cassandra, we can take them on. Where are you staying?” “About a mile away.” They took out two additional rooms for the night. Chad and his men would watch for the enemy from the Suburban. If the Hogs don’t show up they planned to retrace their steps and head west again until they reached the Dakotas, and then head for the Canadian border. The night was quiet. No one showed up as dawn rose over the eastern roof of the inn. Chad knocked on Ray and Cassandra’s door. Ray answered, ready to go. He then knocked on Eugene’s room, but there was no answer. He knocked a little harder, but there was still no answer. He walked over to Pamela’s door. Pamela and Eugene shared a double and it was possible Eugene was over on Pamela’s side. He knocked on her door. No answer. Now he was beginning to get worried. He knocked harder and yelled for Pamela, but there was still no answer. Ray heard the commotion and came over. Then he checked to see if her vehicle was still in the parking lot. It was. “I’ll get the manager.” He entered the office, and the manager was just making coffee. “Good morning,” Ray said. The manager turned around and greeted him. “Two of your guests are missing—the Mulligans.” “Missing?” “Yeah—as in not answering our knock.” “Well, they’re probably showering.” “No, I don’t think they’re in

there.” “Maybe they went out for breakfast.” “Is there a restaurant within short walking distance?” The manager thought a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders. “They knew we were leaving now. I would appreciate it if you could check on them.” The manager knocked first, and then entered Pamela’s room. No one was in there. Ray entered Eugene’s room, but he wasn’t there either. Their clothes were there and the beds were slept in, but they were gone. The front desk guy didn’t seem concerned as they were paid through the night. They all agreed to meet in Ray and Cassandra’s room to try and figure out what happened. “How is this possible, Chad?” Ray said. “What if the Hogs found us?” Cassandra said. “Bones and me watched the motel through the night,” said Chad. “Nothing happened.” “Well, there was the white cargo van that pulled up around midnight,” Bones said. “Was that the one parked in front of Eugene’s room? I remember seeing one when I took over the 0300 watch.” “Yeah, that’s the one. A couple guys got out and went upstairs.” “You think those guys kidnapped them?” Foote said. “It shouldn’t be possible,” Chad said. Ray looked askance. “...unless someone fell asleep.” “I swear to God I did not fall asleep,” Bones said. Chad sighed. “It’s clear one of us did. We didn’t get much sleep on the way here.” “Wait a second,” Bones said. “I remembered looking at the license plate. It’s a habit I developed over the years. I also looked for some details about the cargo van. Then I didn’t think about it anymore.” “How ‘bout it, Bones?” Ray said. “The cargo van was white and new—no dings or dents, not even a scrape. The plate was something like AGS, and there was a four in there.” Ray frowned. “You mean you didn’t write it down?” “There was no reason to. I never write the plate down. Ninety-nine percent of the time there’s no reason to do so. Besides, we should have enough of the plate, and the fact it’s a cargo van, white, and new or late model.” “It’s enough information,” Armstrong said. Wrenn spoke up. “Lay yah two to one odds it’s a rental.” “The front office,” Ray said. “They may be able to give us more information.” Chad shook his head. “Don’t be too sure. Privacy and all, and we aren’t exactly the police.” “For a couple C-notes he might tell us who it was,” Ray said. Chad thought about it for a second. “Couldn’t hurt.” Ray came back about fifteen minutes later. “It’s Carlos Colderon, and I got the license plate.” “Now we need to know which direction they went. We’ll need to split up. Ray and Cassandra—you go north. We’ll go south.” “I can hotwire Pamela’s car,” Bones said. “Then we can have three vehicles searching. That way we can cover more

roads.” “Why should we even bother to go north?” Cassandra said. “They’re probably heading back to Illinois. There’s no reason to go north.” “Yeah, there is,” Bones said. “We’re just assuming they would be headed back to Illinois, but we don’t exactly know that for sure.” “Exactly,” Chad said. “That’s why I want you traveling north. And, everyone, I have a map of Squad battalion headquarters. Check all along or near your route. They may have taken them there.” “What chance do we really have?” Ray said. “They have a head start of several hours. My guess is that they’re taking them to the new Hell House, and I don’t know where that is.” “I have an idea,” Chad said. “Those two doctors have inside information. Maybe they can help us.” Chad pulled out his mobile phone and punched in the number. The phone rang. A moment later, “Dr. Schmidt? Hello, this is Chad Armstrong.” (Pause) “No, I’m sorry. Not yet. Look, we have a problem. Pamela Piper and her charge, Eugene Sulke, have been kidnapped—” (Pause) “Look, it just happened. We have to focus on getting them back. We know they were taken in a white cargo van, new, license plate ASG 410. Do you know who it might belong to?” After a moment and turning to the group, “He put me on hold.” “Huh? Jesus. Okay. Call me if you find out anything more.” Turning to the other members of the group, “He doesn’t know who it belongs to, but they won’t be bringing them to the new Hell House. They’ve shut down the Brain Probe Operation, and....” Chad hesitated to continue. “What is it?” Ray said. “He thinks they’re just going to kill them.”



Several hours went by and no one saw the mysterious cargo van. Ray and Cassandra checked at every restaurant, diner, and motel on the highway, but nothing. They snooped around at four battalion command posts but no white van.

“We’re getting close to the Canadian border. This is ridiculous, Cass. Call up Armstrong and ask him what he wants us to do.”

Cassandra did so. “He told us to turn around and retrace our steps. They haven’t had any luck either.”

“Christ! This is so fucked up, Cass. It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack, and it’ll be dark in a couple hours.”

“What happens then?”

“We’ll just keep going. That’s all we can do now.”

Cassandra began sobbing. Ray glanced over to her as if to say “what’s wrong”, but didn’t say anything.

“It’s all my fault,” she mumbled. Ray said nothing.

“If I hadn’t....”

“Hon, we said we’d forget about it.”

“But I can’t forget,” she said through sporadic tears. “First we and Dennis tried to tear him apart, then I got him put into prison, let Dennis rescue him, only to put him in Hell House, and now he’s been kidnapped, and for all we know, he might be dead right now.”

“First, it was Casimir, not you. He was the instigator to everything—it wasn’t us. There’d be no need for us to get involved if it wasn’t for Casimir. The moment he found Catherine, Eugene’s whole world collapsed. That was the moment the reality of this fucked up world hit home. All we did was make him understand that.”

Cassandra still had tears in her eyes when she turned to Ray. “Do you think they’re still alive?”

“Yeah.” But he didn’t sound convincing.

The pulsating rhythm of the road had a hypnotizing effect on Ray. He’d constantly look up at the traffic or the trees to keep from nodding off, though he was tired. Daydreaming became an uncontrollable comfort.

“They’re going to disband us,” Colderon said.

Ray was too upset to respond. He kept thinking about his brother Dennis. Colderon looked at him with a smirk.

“You’re such a damned idealist.”

Ray glared at him. “At least my life has meaning.”

“Mine too. And, unlike you, I want to keep what I earn. Ray, you’re too idealistic. This is an opportunity man—you and me—we can make a fortune. With your muscle and my organization skills we could be the fiercest duo in America. You recruit the muscle, I recruit the customers, and we keep what we make—no turning it over to a bunch of losers.”

“You don’t understand, Carlos. We’ll all be losers. Martinez and that hack, Casimir, will fuck us over at the first opportunity. If you want to be a winner then know that we have to overthrow this moldy old regime and become part of the New World.”

“The only thing you’re going to get is prison or a bullet.”

“You okay, Ray?” asked Cassandra.

Ray didn’t answer.

“You look like you want to swat something. I hope it isn’t me.”

Ray came out of la-la land as he turned to his wife.

“What?”

“Were you thinking about your brother?”

“No...well, maybe a little.”

“It’s this world we live in. It corrupts us all one way or another. Pamela said Eugene talked about surrendering, and letting them use the brain probe on him.”

“What? You got to be kidding. He’s got to be kidding. Why would he say a thing like that?”

“So he can forget,” she said sadly. “He wants to forget Catherine, Zinney, and not care about how his new promotion would fuck us all over even more.”

“You don’t think Eugene would bargain with them.”

“There’s nothing to bargain over. They shut Hell House down. I think if we don’t find him and Pamela soon, we won’t ever see them again.”



“This isn’t working, Chad,” Bones said.

“I know, man. Let’s continue on this course until we reach Illinois, and then head for Old Chicago. If we don’t find the van on the way there, then there may be leads for us in town.” Armstrong relayed instructions to Foote and Wrenn.

It was now past dark. Everyone wanted to know what to do. Chad Armstrong told them to just take turns driving, and try to get some sleep.

Chad turned to Bones. “I was just thinking of that day when I found Dennis O’Reilly after he disappeared for almost a year. I yelled for him on the other side of the street. He just looked queerly at me. I went over to him to shake his hand, and he asked me who I was. Imagine that, Bones, he didn’t even know me. Said he was on his way to Squad headquarters to apply for a job there.” Armstrong just looked away sadly. “Can you imagine that—Dennis O’Reilly applying for a job as a squad member?”

“Just fucked up.”

"I feel bad charging Ray so much money."

"We gotta live, too."

"I know. If I thought he'd have half a chance...well...we could work something out."

"The only time he calls on us is to bail his ass out."

"So far we've failed him. At least it's those sicko doctors that are paying us this time."

"What chance will they have if Eugene and Pamela can't be found? They aren't going to pay us the rest."

"So? If we lose them we don't deserve anything more."

Armstrong was deep in thought until he turned to his friend. "I think I was the one who fell asleep."

"Did you get much sleep last night?"

"No. I needed to think. I had to put a plan together to figure out how to lure Colderon to us if he didn't go to the motel, and then figure out how to kill the Hogs. When I took over your watch I just remembered it got to dawn awfully early. Shit, I dozed off. That's when the kidnapping occurred. I fucked up."

Just then three motorcycles passed them. They never heard them coming.

"What do you think?" Bones said.

"I think we might have gotten a break."

"The middle guy had a funny looking helmet on. Maybe Colderon?"

"Follow them at a distance, Bones. Keep the brake light of the rear pointman in view."

"They're moving across to the right lane. We're coming up on an exit with restaurants. You think—"

"I think we got lucky. Look, they're turning off. Don't lose them."

The cyclists turned into a burger joint.

"Follow them in, Bones."

"Chad—over there. Isn't that...yeah—the cargo van."

"And it's Colderon in the middle. I'd know that bastard anywhere. Lay back until they go inside."

They cruised behind the van.

"That's it," Bones said.

"Pull around the front of it." Bones parked the truck right in front of the van.

“If they’re in there, you may have to pick some locks. I’ll watch the restaurant for any sign of them.”

Bones got his stuff. He went over to the driver side. The door was locked. He went over to the passenger side. The door opened. He climbed in, carefully closing the door. He looked to the back and smiled. There they were. Their mouths were taped and they were handcuffed to the bulkhead. He crawled back there, and taking out his knife, cut the plastic cuffs. Both started to remove the tape over their mouths when Bones motioned to them not to talk.

Armstrong called Wrenn and Foote with the good news. Foote answered, but Chad heard Wrenn telling one of his dirtiest jokes. “...then the guy says ‘did you really think I was asking for a ten inch Bic?’”

“Shit, not that one again,” Chad said, laughing.

“I’ve had to listen to his jokes all day. What’s up?”

“We found them.” He heard Foote yelling to Wrenn with the message.

Ray and Cassandra were equally excited. They arranged to rendezvous at a motel on Rt. 89 to discuss new plans.



“They’re gone?” Dennis was flabbergasted.

Colderon steamed. *Cocksucker.*

“Are you there?”

“Yeah.” *Fuckhead.*

Dennis knew he couldn’t afford to lose his cooperation, so he dropped the attitude. “Look, just tell me what happened.”

“It was like I told you before. We found that jalopy she was driving—”

“Yeah. It took a lot of bribe money, but we got a lead. She bought the car from somebody we’ve been keeping tabs on for a while.”

“We rented a room above so we could check the registry. They’re still using the Mulligans. I brought three of my men with me, and leased a van. We parked right in front of their door and called for Eugene. I didn’t expect he’d answer, but he did. We got him and Pamela, but we didn’t know what to do with them. You weren’t answering your phone. We drove around for a while and stopped at a burger joint for supper. When we came back to the van they were gone.”

“Casimir had me on an assignment. I had to keep my phone off. I told you that when you told me you found them. I assumed you were bringing them here. My brother and his wife must have been with them, but how did they know where to go?”

“They must have figured it out. If they saw me go by, they’d have followed us.”

“Who would recognize the van? You told me that there was no one out there.”

“One of them must have stood watch from their vehicle.”

“Then how did you pull off the kidnapping?”

“I told you we parked in front of his room,” he said angrily. “We were quiet and fast. He’d have thought it was just a guest getting an early start. How the fuck do I know?”

“Then how did they know they were in your van?”

“Maybe there are more of them. These people were Blues. If Ray had help there, and I surmise he did, then I know they’re good. Christ, I trained under him.”

“All right, let’s focus on how to get them.”

“If I know Ray like I do, then he’ll let us come to him. We know all their plans now. It was with Pamela—maps and everything. They’re not going to go anywhere. My guess is they’ll go back to that same motel and wait for us. Then we’ll have it out.”

CHAPTER 20:

A BIG HOG SHOWDOWN

Chad Armstrong was made leader of security with Ray's blessing. He'd handle all security issues now. He got them four rooms at the "kidnap" motel; all singles. Armstrong and Bones would tradeoff every few hours with Foote and Wrenn, who would be on lookout from the Suburban. They all met in Ray's room.

"Okay, I get that we have to face the Hogs now rather than fall into some trap later," Pamela said. "But what's going to happen when they get here?"

Chad nodded, acknowledging her question. "That's what we need to discuss."

"Terry Foote and I staked the place out," Wrenn said. "We can get up on the roof with our pieces. We can shoot them with no witnesses and get right back down."

"How are you going to get up there?" Eugene asked.

"Climb," answered Wrenn, with a subtle grin.

Armstrong just smiled. "They can see better from up there. If the Hogs get past them, we'll be waiting for 'em."

"How?" Eugene asked again. "What if they come to my door, or Pamela's?"

"Don't answer," Ray said.

"We should arm them," Cassandra said.

Armstrong nodded. "Okay. We have extra hand guns. If we need to get you, we'll rap twice, pause, and twice more; and then we'll identify ourselves. If you don't hear that knock, don't answer the door. That goes for everybody. If someone forces their way in, shoot to kill."

"We should have a sign for skedaddle," Wrenn said.

Armstrong thought a moment. "Danger! That will be the sign to get in your vehicles and get out of here. We should head for South Dakota again and follow the original route."

“Sounds like the plan,” Ray said.

“Me and Bones will take the first watch on the roof. The rest of you, go to your rooms and wait for the Hogs,” Chad said, smiling.

A few minutes later Foote came to Pamela and Eugene’s rooms with two Berettas. He got them together to show them how to use the military weapons. “This is the safety. Keep it on until you need to use the weapon. This is a nine millimeter, semi-automatic pistol. You hold it like this.”

Foote aimed at the rear wall. He showed how to hold the pistol with two hands. “Get a good athletic stand with knees bent and about shoulder distance apart. Stick your fanny out like this. Keep your trigger finger on the guard—not the trigger—until you’re ready to shoot. Here’s the safety. The weapon is ready to fire when you see the red dot. Aim at the middle of the guy’s chest, and fire.”



Colderon and his Hogs raced up Rte. 89. It was late when they got to the motel where they pulled off the kidnapping. Piper’s car was there.

“You got a tracker?” Colderon said to Piggy, his squad leader.

“Yeah.”

“Put it on the clunker she’s using.”

Piggy got out and walked to the car. Shots rang out, and Piggy went down. Colderon cut out of the parking lot. He turned around, entered the back lot, and then waited.

Armstrong and Bones came out slowly. Bones pulled out his Berretta and trained it on Piggy. He was moving a little, but there wasn’t much blood. They disarmed the Hog, and then Armstrong motioned for Bones to help carry him into their room.

“Rubber bullets,” Bones said.

They tied him up and muzzled him in Armstrong’s room, while Chad fished out his phone. “I know a way we can get what we need out of him,” he said.

Armstrong hung up, and the two went to Ray and Cassandra’s room, gave the proper knock, identified themselves, and entered.

“What happened out there?” both of them demanded.

“It was the Hogs,” Armstrong said. “They came. Wrenn and Foote shot one of them. We have him tied up in my room. Colderon is in the back parking lot as we speak, but I’ve got an idea. I called Dr. Schmidt, Dr. Grifton, and the woman who’s with them, and told them to come here. They’re leaving right away, but they’re bringing all their chemicals. Schmidt told me that one of the drugs acts as a kind of truth serum. Doctors Schmidt and Grifton know how to use them properly. This way we can learn what the Hogs are up to, what they know, what their plans are, and any other pertinent information we can get. Bones, why don’t you go over there and let Pamela and Eugene know what’s going on. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

“What about the Hogs in back?” Cassandra asked.

“We do exactly what they’re doing—wait.”



Schmidt wouldn’t get there until tomorrow. In the meantime, Armstrong was interrogating Piggy. The motel manager never saw Colderon and never knew about any impending contention between two enemy groups.

“Can you at least tell me what to call you?”

“Piggy.”

“Like a real Hog, huh?”

Piggy didn’t say anything. He just ate his sandwich. “I ain’t telling you nothin’ else.”

“Oh, I think you will,” Armstrong said with a slight smile on his face.

“Fuck!” Piggy snorted. “Why do you think that?”

“Because everyone talks eventually.”

Piggy, an ex-Blue and close confidant of Carlos Colderon, was tough and true to his word—he wouldn’t talk. He looked like an overstuffed Panda Bear. Born Jevaun Williams from Jamaica, this dark-complexioned big man was Carlos’s muscle guy. He once took on a pack of five drug dealers, broke one guy’s jaw with a single punch, slapped another to the ground, picked up two more, and slammed them to the ground. The last man ran off. The only way to tackle this guy was to shoot him first.

Ray O’Reilly released his handcuffs periodically so he could eat, while Armstrong kept a gun on him. Piggy would always laugh at the treatment,

though Armstrong knew that Ray was his equal in strength.

With Schmidt on the way, Piggy began laughing as he finished his sandwich.

“What’s so funny, Piggy?” Armstrong said.

“You can’t get no...info.” Then he started laughing again, imitating the Rolling Stones song, *Satisfaction*. “Can’t get no...info. No, no, info. You can try, and try, and try, and try, but you can’t get no...info.” Then he just laughed again. He put down the sandwich and looked up at Armstrong with a grin. “You wanna know why?” Then he raised his voice. “Cause I don’t know nothin’, ha-ha. Hog don’t tell nothin’ to nobody who ain’t got no business knowin’ nothin’, ha-ha.”

Armstrong looked at him with a grin on his face too. Then he leaned over to Piggy. “You know stuff, and then I’m gonna know stuff. Finish your sandwich.”

Someone knocked at the door, but not the secret knock. Armstrong was cautious, but he was expecting the two doctors.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Doctor Schmidt.”

Armstrong opened the door. He gave him his room key, told him to go next door, and that he would be there in about ten minutes. Armstrong waited for Piggy to finish eating, then Ray tied him up, muzzled him, and the two went to Ray and Cassandra’s room. They were relieved from roof duty by Foote and Wrenn. Ray and Cassandra volunteered to take Armstrong’s place so that Armstrong could command operations from the ground. He explained his plan to everyone, and then went to Schmidt’s room.

“This room is not acceptable,” Schmidt said. “Too many beds. I need a single room with a single bed. Then, what are you going to do about maid service? I can’t have some damn maid coming into my laboratory.”

“I’ll take care of it, Schmidt.”

“Doctor Schmidt.”

“Yeah, Doctor Schmidt. Where’s the other esteemed doctor?”

“Dr. Grifton is in the van watching the equipment.”

“What about the woman you said was with you?”

“Wait!” Schmidt dialed a number. “Dr. Schmidt here. Where are you?”

(Pause) “Oh, okay. You know where we are, right?”

(Pause) “Good. Come to room 117.”

(Pause) “Good.” He hung up. Turning to the other three, “She’s on her way. Should be here in about half an hour. Now, what about my room and my privacy?”

Armstrong went to the front office. He was gone about ten minutes. He knocked twice on Schmidt’s room, paused, and knocked twice again. Then he said softly, “Armstrong.” He let him in.

“Everything’s set.”

“You got my room?”

“One each for you, Dr. Grifton, and the woman.”

“And the bed?”

“The manager is going to remove the other bed in there. You’ll have a single bed for you and your lab.”

“And this was okay with the manager?” Schmidt asked.

“Of course it is,” Armstrong said. “He hasn’t had so much business in ten years’ worth of off seasons. When I showed him an extra five one hundred dollar bills, his eyes lit up. Then he says ‘you don’t have an orgy going on, do you?’ And I said, ‘so what if we do?’ Then he says, ‘Just don’t do anything to attract the cops.’ I said, ‘sure’. The extra bed will be gone in an hour.”



Eugene Sulke was reading when there was a knock at his door. It was just a plain old knock, so he was nervous. He got the gun Armstrong gave him and slipped off the safety. “Who is it?”

“My name is Sandra. I’m with the two doctors that arrived a little while ago. Are you Phillip Mulligan?”

Phillip Mulligan? He opened the door slowly and saw a woman, around forty-five, attractive, with light brown hair; curly, and extended down to the middle of her back. Her hazel eyes were bright, and she was dressed in a grey skirt and white blouse. There was a certain familiarity about her, but he wasn’t sure why. He could see her eyes were fixated on the gun he still carried. “Oh, I’m sorry. We’re supposed to carry it unless we hear the special knock.”

“Are you Phillip? Pamela told me you had this room?” Eugene just stared at her.

“May I come in? I promise I’m not dangerous.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry. Please.” He motioned for her to come in and then put the gun away.

They began talking, and Sandra mentioned Fernando. “I used to know a Fernando,” Eugene said. “He was in Joliet when I was in prison. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Anyway, he was my cellmate. He talked about how he lost his wife to the camp.”

“Wait! You were in Joliet prison? When?”

“A few months ago. I was let out by a man who I thought was my best friend. It turned out he just let me out so I could be tortured in this brain probe place called—”

“Hell House.”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“I’ve only just figured it out myself. I went through it. I believe I am the wife your Fernando talked about. I was in Joliet prison too. I’m still not sure for what. I believe it was for extortion, but I don’t believe that.”

Eugene grabbed a bottle of wine from his stash and poured it into a couple glasses.

“That’s what Fernando told me he was in for too. He took out a loan from his employer and couldn’t pay it back. Fernando said that’s what happened to you too. You couldn’t pay back a loan, so when you ran off they charged you with extortion. You were jailed and Fernando was sent home. Then he said that you came to him a few months later with divorce papers, and your lawyer told him he had to sign them. He only did it when you yelled at him to sign those papers. He knew you went through what he called ‘the camps’.”

“Those were images I had, but I couldn’t quite remember why I did that. My memories of Fernando were all so sweet. I know that I loved him, but then those memories were all taken away from me. All I could remember was falling in love with Jaydan Casimir, the Commandant of the Lightning Squad. The problem is that I never felt anything for him, and he’s so much older than I. I couldn’t figure out what I had seen in him until my dreams started.”

“Dreams?”

“Yes, didn’t you have them? They stuck you in Hell House too. That’s why I came here.”

“Yes, but I was rescued after three days. I have a vivid memory of that terrible brain probe. So you started to remember through dreaming about it?”

Sandy filled Eugene in on the dreams, the visions, her research; and how she came to realize that it was only the brain probe that made her think she had always loved Jaydan, and that Fernando was such a terrible husband.

“You said you didn’t remember Fernando, but then you said they made you hate him.”

“I think they made me hate him to convince him to sign the divorce papers. Then they must have taken all memory of him away. You were with him in prison. Oh, please, Phillip, tell me about him.”

They were interrupted by a loud noise, a crashing sound, and then the sound of gunfire from next door.

Sandy screamed. “What’s that?” she said in a panicked manner. “What’s happening out there?”

“I think the Hogs came back.”

She flashed a questioning look at him. “Don’t say anything more, Sandra. We must remain quiet until we get the all-clear. All the people we’re with are experts. They’ll deal with the problem.”

Eugene stood by the door, trying to listen to what was going on outside.



“Foote,” Armstrong said over the phone. “What’s happening?”

“All I know is that the Hogs drove the van around to your side, but parked it close to the building so I couldn’t see too well, and then, when me and Wrenn moved close to the edge to get a better view, we got shot at by someone near one of the parked vehicles. They missed us, but they got Bones.”

Armstrong’s heart dropped. “What’s his condition?”

“It doesn’t look good. He’s not moving.”

Armstrong hesitated, composing himself. “What was the crashing noise?”

“Four of them busted Pamela’s door down. She shot at one, but I don’t know if she killed any. They grabbed her. I don’t know her situation since

they secured the broken door.”

“Try and get that sniper on the ground, will you?”

“He’s pretty well hidden, but maybe we can draw him out.”

“Stay on him.”

Chad walked to the door and opened it; then yelled out, “What are your terms?”

“Who am I talking to?” shouted a voice from the adjacent room.

“The name’s Armstrong. Is this Colderon?”

“Armstrong? I remember you,” he said with a smile. “You working with Ray O’Reilly?”

“I remember you too. We used to fight on the same side. I guessed that’s all changed.”

“Where is Piggy? I saw you shoot him.”

“He’s fine. We have him tied up. Do you want him?”

“What are your terms?”

“We give him back to you, and you leave without Pamela.”

“Can’t do that, Armstrong. I came for Sulke. Guess I got the wrong room. Here’s my terms. Give me Sulke and Piggy, and I’ll give you back Piper. We’ll leave then, and you are free to go about your business.”

“Let me think about it.”

“Think fast. You got fifteen minutes.”



Piggy had been interrogated by Dr. Schmidt. They gave him a sedative so Ray could carry him to Dr. Schmidt’s room. They had him strapped to a gurney. Before each session he was given a chemical that made him relax, and then a truth serum, but Piggy was stubborn. Schmidt was beginning to believe he really didn’t know anything, but Grifton wanted to increase the dosage and try it once more. Schmidt did so.

“What is the plan?” Dr. Schmidt said.

“I don’t know,” Piggy said, in a sleepy manner.

“Who do you want?”

“Sulke.”

The two doctors just looked at each other. It was the first positive answer they had gotten. Piggy started to drop off and Schmidt gave him a

shot of adrenaline.

“What about Sulke?” Dr. Schmidt asked.

“Have to kill him.”

“Who else?”

Piggy then smiled. He looked up at Schmidt. “All of you.”

Schmidt called Armstrong and let him know what Piggy confessed. Armstrong thought a minute.

Colderon yelled out. “Five minutes.”

“All right, here’s the plan,” Armstrong said. “Ray and Cassandra—go get Piggy and start him in my direction. Then, using Piggy as a shield, duck behind my truck. The Hog outside prevents us from doing anything. Find him and shoot him. If you can’t do that, then flush him out, where Foote or Wrenn can get a bead on him. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Ray and Cassandra went to get Piggy. He was wobbly and couldn’t walk without assistance. Because of Piggy’s size, only Ray could walk him along while Cassandra kept a gun in Piggy’s back. When they got to Armstrong’s door, Chad grabbed him around the neck, holding a knife to him. He moved over to Colderon’s door. “Where’s Piper?”

“She’s right here, Armstrong.”

“I’ve got Piggy. Release the woman.”

“Where’s Sulke?”

“He’s not in his room.”

“What! What are you pulling, Armstrong?”

“It’ll have to be Piggy. Sulke must have gone out somewhere. I don’t know where he is. Now release Pamela or I slit Piggy’s throat.”

“You got two minutes, Armstrong. Give me Sulke or Piper gets it.”

“No dice, Colderon. We got your guys surrounded. They won’t be any help to you. You kill Pamela and you just signed your death warrant.”

“What are we going to do now?” Moon asked, a Squad member working with the Hogs.

“Let me think.”

“We’re trapped in here,” yelled Moon.

“This was a lousy plan from the start,” Murph said; another Squad member.

“Shut up!” yelled Colderon.

“I told you we should have one guy in the truck.” Colderon gave him an evil look, but Murph just continued. “Now we’re all boxed in here. Fucking

mess.”

An angry Carlos stared at him. “I told you we couldn’t keep a guy in the truck because he’d be a sitting duck for those two guys on the roof, not to mention anyone outside. So long as we have Piper they can’t do anything. Bring her over to the door.”

Turning toward the door, “Hey, Armstrong. You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here.”

“Listen, the Piper woman is right at the door. You storm the room and you sign her death warrant. Got it?”

Armstrong pulled the limping Piggy along back to the gurney, and then he gave a hand signal to Ray and Cassandra. He held up his two index fingers side by side. Then he moved one finger away from the other, to the back of the other hand. Ray understood, and separated from Cassandra, circling around behind Sandra’s car. Armstrong yelled over to Colderon. “Listen up. Let Pamela go, and then we’ll let you leave freely. If you don’t, we kill Piggy and your two men outside. Got it?”

Colderon steamed, but didn’t answer. He looked at Moon and Murph, and figured they’d be no help. He needed Piggy, but it would mean trading Piper for him. Another option would be to wait for the motel manager to come and force the issue. A third option would be to call the police. It was the riskiest of all. The police might believe they’re on orders from Casimir and turn all of them over to him or arrest all of them.

Armstrong called over to Colderon. “Let Pamela go now or I will take out the two guys outside. Make your decision in the next two minutes.”

Colderon knew if he let Pamela go he’d have no bargaining power. The two outside were little help to him now. “I want Sulke!”

“Foote, it’s Armstrong. Are you sure no one else is in the back?”

“No, Chad. They’re all in front.”

“Send Wrenn down at the other end of the building. I want three people on those two ground Hogs and you on the roof.”

The three began closing in on the Hogs, who began to panic.

“Hey, wait a minute,” one of them called out.

“Come out of there,” yelled Armstrong, who stepped out of Ray’s room, next to Colderon. “Come out and you won’t be hurt.”

The two came crawling out of the cargo van and surrendered. They were disarmed, handcuffed, and put in the same room with Piggy. Colderon

saw what was going on, but figured they were expendable. He still had Pamela Piper, and she was his ticket out now.

“Hey, Armstrong, you let us out with Pamela and give me Piggy, and the rest of you can go free. How ‘bout it Armstrong? Chad?”

“Let me think about it.”

With the outside Hogs, who he was calling ground Hogs, out of the picture Chad called Ray, Cassandra, and Wrenn over for a little pow wow. He still wanted Foote on the roof for extra security. They met in the parking lot behind the Suburban.

A few minutes later Armstrong came near the room. “All right. We’ll get Piggy, but you surrender Pamela as soon as you’re free.”

“Sure,” came the answer; both sides sure the other was lying.

Armstrong went over to Schmidt’s room and gave the secret knock, but no one answered. He called for Schmidt, but there was still no answer. Suddenly three shots were fired from inside through the door, just missing Armstrong. Ray and Cassandra came running over to see what was going on. Wrenn watched for Colderon. They all looked at each other in bewilderment. Armstrong called Foote and let him know to watch that door too. At once Colderon came barreling out of his room, pushing Pamela in front. Moon and Murph followed and shot upwards toward Foote. Foote took cover, but Moon and Murph were shot at from the four on the ground. Moon panicked and dropped his weapon. Murph shot back and was killed. Colderon then sped out of the parking lot, but drove erratically and then stopped. Pamela came screaming out of the van. Colderon then jumped out and began shooting at Pamela. Pamela went down, and then Colderon went down in a hail of bullets. They all rushed to see what happened to Pamela, but she was all right.

Pamela was breathing hard, but was calming down. “He put his gun away, and so I opened the door to jump out. He tried to grab me, and then pulled his gun out, but I jumped out when he hit the break.”

“That’s why he was driving so erratically,” Wrenn said.

“Yes. I knew I had to act fast. I figured I’d be as good as dead anyway, so I tried to jump out. Then he shot at me. I knew he would, so I ducked and just lay on the ground.”

Ray and Cassandra went after Moon, but couldn’t find him. The weapon he dropped was gone too.

Ray came back to report to Armstrong. "I don't know where he is, but he's armed. Should we go after him?"

"We may have a bigger problem in Schmidt's room. Be on the alert."

Chad called Foote. "I was shooting at Colderon," Foote said. "When I looked back for the other guy, he was gone."

The five carefully made their way toward the room of their captives and found the door wide open. Inside, the two doctors were dead. Schmidt had his throat slashed and Grifton had been shot. The assassins and Piggy were gone.

Armstrong went to Eugene's room and gave the secret knock. "That you, Armstrong?" came a voice from someone, but not Eugene. "You gave away the secret knock. Here's the new deal—ha ha—let us go and I don't harm your friends; otherwise, I'll kill them."

Armstrong recognized Piggy's voice. It appeared they were in an even worse position than before. Now they had Eugene and Sandra, and an armed pointman on the loose.

Armstrong needed to do something quickly. It was now five o'clock and the manager or owner would be coming in at six. There was no telling what he'd do when he found out what was going on. Armstrong had to make a quick decision, and conferred with his comrades. Pamela was sent to her room so as to be out of danger. Wrenn was sent to Colderon's white van. Armstrong called Foote, and everyone understood what to do. Foote stood right over the door with his rifle trained on the area just outside.

"All right, Piggy. We'll do it your way. Come on out."

"It's a trap," yelled one of the ground Hogs.

"Shut up!" Piggy yelled, but he was still wobbly from being shot, as well as the chemicals the doctors used on him.

"Put your weapons down on the ground where I can see them," Piggy demanded. The four did so. Sulke, with hands tied behind his back, emerged first, followed by Piggy, holding a piece to Eugene's back. Then came Sandra, followed by the two ground Hogs.

"Anybody tries anything, and Sulke dies. Understand?" Piggy yelled.

"Everything's cool," Armstrong said, reassuringly.

"You, on the roof," one of them yelled. "Put your weapon down."

"Anyone shoots," Piggy yelled, "and Sulke gets it. Get it?"

There were shouts of "Okay."

While this was going on Ray slipped into Eugene's room and came out a minute later, nodding affirmatively.

Armstrong's phone rang.

"Chad, I just spotted that escapee. He's armed with a revolver. He was hiding in the bushes next to the office. He's sneaking around to the side of the building."

"Can you get a bead on him?" Armstrong said, speaking in a low voice.

"Not yet."

"Keep your eye on him. Take him out when you can."

They got to the cargo van, but the doors were locked. They turned around and saw Armstrong smiling while twirling the keys around his finger. Piggy and the other two guys looked around but didn't see anyone else.

"It's a trap," one of them yelled. "I fucking knew it."

"Shut up," Piggy yelled back.

Then Piggy began yelling at Armstrong. "Give me those keys, Armstrong. Where are your friends? I told you I'd kill those two if you try anything."

"Relax, Piggy. I'll give them to you." Armstrong was calm as he walked toward the van, twirling the keys around his index finger a little faster now. Piggy gave the gun he was using to one of the ground Hogs, whispering instructions.

Now Piggy was smiling. "Doesn't matter what your game is, Armstrong. I've got orders to kill Sulke. It'll just be plain ole fun to put a bullet in him." Grinning, his white teeth shining against his dark lips, he held out his left hand to take the keys. Armstrong, still grinning and twirling, let the keys fly off his finger just as he approached Piggy.

Piggy just grinned at Armstrong. He laughed, and looked over to one of his Hogs, "Do Sulke now."

Armstrong was unfazed as a shot from Wrenn rang out and Piggy collapsed to the ground. Moon got spooked and came running from the building to take dead aim on Armstrong, but missed. His revolver had poor range from that distance. Now exposed, Foote drew a bead on him, and took him out.

Sandra screamed, and Eugene was frightened out of his mind. The guy with the gun aimed right at Eugene's head and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

Ray came over. "Need some help? This one works," he said as he calmly shot the gunman. The last guy fled and headed to Pamela's room. He figured his only chance now was to grab Pamela and make his escape. He pushed through the broken door and saw Pamela standing there. He smiled and moved to grab her but Pamela pulled the gun from her back and shot him dead.

Ray came running over, saw what happened, and smiled.

"He didn't give the secret knock," she said calmly. "They surprised me the first time, but this time I wasn't taking any chances."

Eugene then bent over Sandra, who had fainted, and helped her up. Pamela came out, saw Sandra on the ground, and came running over to them. But everyone was okay.

Eugene turned to Chad in astonishment. "You knew that gun wouldn't fire."

Chad smiled. "It was the same gun I gave to Dr. Schmidt. I didn't trust him with a loaded weapon so I removed the clip and put an empty one in instead. I left him with one bullet in the chamber. When we entered his room we saw the two dead doctors. Our three prisoners were disarmed, but I must have missed the knife one of them had. He probably cut himself free, surprised Schmidt, and slit his throat, taking his gun. He probably got Grifton to wake up Piggy, and then shot him with the only bullet he had."

"But Eugene had a gun too," said Sandra. "He had the gun when I opened the door."

"Yeah, but I put it away."

Foote nodded. "I told him to keep it in the top drawer. I didn't want him carrying it around."

"Exactly!" Armstrong said.

"I confirmed the gun was still there," Ray said.

"Folks," Armstrong said, "you were never ever in real danger, except for that pointman with the pea shooter. Foote already had him under cover."

"I hate to break up this happy ending, people," Pamela said, "but we've got a bunch of dead bodies, bullet holes, a busted in door—and the manager will be here in ten minutes. We better...how'd you put it...oh yeah, skedaddle on out of here."

Cassandra just smiled. "I'll explain it all to the manager when he comes in."

Pamela was astounded. "Are you crazy? We got to get out of here, now. This place will be crawling with cops. What if they're on their way now?"

Armstrong was more relaxed. "Point one. Unless one of us or them called the police, they aren't on the way. The reason is that the other wing of the motel is closed down for the winter. We're the only ones here.

"Second, the manager knows our vehicles, can identify us, and we'd be caught as fugitives running from multiple murders."

"Cassandra is about as good as it gets at convincing someone of our good intentions," Ray said.

Sandy and Eugene wanted to know what her plan was.

Cassandra explained. "A motorcycle gang was bent on rape, robbery, and murder. They came in the middle of the night, there was a shootout, and we killed them. Their bikes are still in the cargo van."

"He's going to call the police and let them do their own investigation," Pamela said.

"You do have the doctors' money, huh? And Sandy's?" Cassandra said.

"Yeah."

"We'll need about ten grand of the money. It'll be needed for repairs to the motel, and that manager will come out financially ahead. Sure, he'll call the police after we leave, but we'll be well out of their jurisdiction when they get here. We'll get away."

Cassandra went to the office and waited for the motel guy to get there. Armstrong, Wrenn and Foote went to Bones's body, and carried him into the SUV. Armstrong was quite distraught as he said his final goodbyes to his lifelong companion.

Cassandra came out twenty minutes later with a smile on her face. "It's all taken care of, fellas. He was pissed at first, but ten grand in the suitcase persuaded him to accept the story, and he promised he'd wait a couple hours before calling the police."

Armstrong called for everyone to pack up and meet in the center of the parking lot. Ten minutes later, Armstrong addressed the group. "Well, our job is done. Pamela, you are about the bravest lady I have ever known. I turn over your troupe to you and we'll go back to our business."

Then Foote spoke up. "Me and Wrenn are going with them, Chad. In lieu of the money, we'll tag along with Ray and Cassandra, provide extra security, and go to New America."

"Why don't you come with us?" Wrenn said. "We could really use you."

“Yeah, come with us, Chad,” Foote said. “If that’s all right with Pamela.”

Pamela smiled. “The more the merrier.”

Chad wore a smirk. “Christ, man. What am I going to do without you guys? I lost Bones, and now you two as well. I got to admit one thing. I sure would like to know what’s on the other side of that border. Virtually no one goes in, no one comes out, and there’s almost a total blackout. Christ, you’d think it’s North Korea.”

“Some people call it heaven,” Ray said.

“I have a home there,” Pamela said. “It is like an escape from hell. Let’s all go there together. This time I’m staying over there.”

“Shit,” Chad said, smiling. “Fine! We’ll be the newest pilgrims.”

Then Wrenn yelled, “On to the New World.”

Then everyone else chimed in. “On to the New World,” cheering.

PART 3:
TO THE NEW WORLD

CHAPTER 21

KIDNAPPED

The group drove about a hundred more miles into northern South Dakota—neutral territory. Armstrong found a spot on the side of the road, in a wooded area near a mile marker. He buried Bones there, and carefully stepped off the distance from the mile marker. After the burial, everyone gathered around his grave while Chad gave the eulogy.

“Today, April 12th, I say good-bye to my friend, Robert Shipley. I called him Bones because at 6-1 and all of 160 pounds he looked like he was all skin and bones. I think, if given a choice, he would have wanted to come with us. My wish is to bury him in the New World, but it’s uncertain how long it will take us to get there. Bones was more than a good soldier, he was my friend. He had all the skills one could want: smart, fearless, and strong. I will sorely miss him. I consider this innocuous place to be only a temporary resting spot. I’m going to come back for you, buddy. I don’t know when, and it may be a long time, but I’ll never forget to come back for you. We’ll give you a proper funeral and burial in the New World. After all, you died to make this happen for the rest of us. God bless you, my man. Rest in peace old faithful friend. Rest in peace.”



The new pilgrims pulled into a motel and grabbed five rooms. Eugene went to Pamela’s room and found Sandy there. “Oh, is this a bad time?”

“No, Gene, it’s all right,” Pamela said.

“So, I’m Gene again?”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“What’s going on?” Sandy said.

“I called him Phillip. That was what outsiders know him as. I couldn’t be sure at first, so I told you his name was Phillip.”

“But it’s Eugene, or just Gene,” he said.

It was a good opportunity for Eugene to get to know Sandy, of whom he remembered Fernando speaking so fondly. Sandy had no groceries, and Armstrong didn’t think it safe for anyone to be off on their own. Eugene found an old restaurant menu in his room that delivered and invited Sandy and Pamela over for pizza.

“You two go. I have something here,” Pamela said.

Sandy smiled and told Gene she’d come.

“Tell me about Fernando. You didn’t get a chance to answer when I asked you that before because the Hogs showed up. He was in many of my dreams. I think I truly loved him.”

Eugene relayed to Sandra everything he remembered from that time in Joliet, and then his experience in Hell House.

Sandy just looked at him curiously. “So, why did they put you in there?”

He then told her the story of his life up to Catherine’s death. Sandy listened sympathetically. They drank much of the last of the wine. Finally, Eugene just said, “I had a good life where I was. I had a well-paying job and a terrific wife, whom I miss very much.”

“Tell me about her, Gene.”

“She was quite beautiful and smart. She taught high school—mostly history and literature—but she could teach math below calculus in a pinch. Then she began drinking heavily. She’d be forgetful, and was always going out a lot. I learned that she was forced into an affair with...Jaydan Casimir, your husband. It was before he met you. When Catherine couldn’t handle it anymore, she killed herself on drugs and booze.”

“Oh my God, Gene. What did you do?”

“No sooner than she died I found myself fighting for my own freedom. That’s when they stuck me in Joliet. It was after Catherine died that Casimir came after you. He came after me too. He thought I’d go radical on him, blame him for Catherine’s death, so they stuck me in Hell House. It turns out that Dennis, Ray’s brother, was just using me. He’s the one who brought me there. I thought he was my friend.” Eugene looked downcast at this point.

“My husband is such a bastard. They say he’s the second most powerful man in the country after this guy named Martinez.”

“Imagine that. It used to be the President.”

“How did this ever happen in the first place?”

Eugene just shrugged. There was a knock at the door.

"It must be the pizza man," Gene said. He looked out the spy hole and then opened the door.

Sandy smiled and ran to the door, and then shrieked. Eugene looked at Sandy, and then at the stunned pizza guy.

"It was another flashback," she exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah. I keep having them. Something about that guy triggered one just now, but I can't make sense of it."

They sat down and had some of the pizza when Sandra, lost in thought, suddenly realized something. "Fernando!"

Eugene just looked at her. "Fernando? What about him?"

Sandra wasn't sure. She just remembered something. "A package," she said. "A package from Fernando."

Eugene just stared at her, and then realized something. "Sandy, I asked Ray to see if he could find out something about Fernando. This was a while back and he never got back to me about it. Maybe this would be a good time to check in on him."

Sandy and Eugene went to Ray and Cassandra's room, and confronted them about Fernando.

Ray invited them in and the four sat around a table. "I decided not to tell you, Gene," Ray said.

"We decided," Cassandra said. "Something awful happened."

"You couldn't do anything about it," Ray said. "We thought it better not to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Eugene said.

"Yes, please tell us," repeated Sandra.

"I'm sorry, Gene, but your worst fears were realized. I heard it from Judy. They did take him to a Hell House, like yourself."

Ray relayed all that he heard from Judy, which was based on the formal report delivered to the Commandant. Then he told him what he'd done to Grifton.

"Good for him. That bastard," Eugene said.

They were all silent when Eugene spoke up. "Why did they stick Fernando in there? Jesus, I get it with politicians, journalists, Populist agitators—I mean, it's wrong—but I get it; but Fernando?"

“Eugene, when Fernando was released from Joliet, he wasn’t taken to Hell House. His boss wanted him back at work. He just wanted to frighten Fernando into working off the loan.”

Eugene was confused. “Then how did he get to Hell House, and how did he get into the Fortress?”

“Getting in wasn’t difficult.”

“Yeah,” Sandy said. “I just remembered. They called me asking me if I was expecting a package. I told them to let him in because Jay was always getting packages.”

“Okay, but what about Hell House?” Eugene asked again.

After he was released from Joliet he didn’t go back to work. He went looking for you, Sandra. Somehow—and I don’t know how—he found out that you married Jaydan Casimir.” Ray stopped briefly. He looked reluctant to go on, but Eugene and Sandra wanted to hear more.

“He found the commandant’s address, and went over to your house,” looking at Sandra. “He had a messenger’s uniform on and a package in his hand when he rang the doorbell.”

“That’s what I was starting to remember,” Sandra said. “He showed up at my door and tried to come in. He was talking crazy and I screamed. I didn’t know who he was. He told me, but this was before my dreams started. Oh, my poor Fernando. I scared him away. He dropped the package and ran off. I told Jay about him and what he said to me, and he told me he’d take care of it. That was all I remembered.”

Eugene was upset. “I still don’t understand how he ended up in Hell House or how he got in. Because he looked up Sandy?”

“Partly. And getting in to the Fortress isn’t that difficult. Delivery people come and go all the time.”

“Yeah, they called me up and asked me if I was expecting a package. Jay gets packages all the time so I told security to let him in.”

“Anyway,” continued Ray, “Casimir called up Martinez, and Martinez told him to 86 him.”

“86?” Sandy said.

“Execute him.”

“What?” Eugene said. “Oh, come on.”

“That’s about what the prosecutor said. Even with Squad justice they weren’t going to execute a man for approaching the commandant’s wife. Still, Casimir had a problem. Even if they put him back in Joliet, he’d talk.

Some nosy Populist blogger might pick up on it. It'd be all over the media. 'Casimir steals man's wife and jails man for it.' Something like that. Martinez couldn't have that. He had to find a way to get rid of him, and then the opportunity came."

Ray stopped and took a swig of his water; then he continued. "Well, Casimir got a call from the Hell House in Joliet. They'd just treated a lefty blogger, and wanted to know if they should close the place. Casimir said no because he had another 'patient.' His word—not mine. Well, you know the rest."

Sandra and Eugene got up to leave and then Sandra stopped; realizing something she'd forgotten. The other three just looked at her.

"The package. I just remembered. After I told Jay about it, I opened it up. It was a bracelet. It was cruddy looking. Later on, I had a dream about that bracelet." She stopped and began crying. "He just wanted me to remember him."



Terry Foote was in Armstrong's Suburban. His partner, Jack Wrenn, was in Ray's car; and both were watching the motel parking lot. They saw a man they didn't recognize approach Pamela's car, walking around it. He had fished around in his pocket for something when Foote yelled out, "You there! Come over here."

The man just froze when Foote got out of the car and motioned him to come over. Wrenn yelled to him, "You better do what he says."

The man walked over to Foote. "What's in your hand?" Foote asked.

"Nothing." Foote forced his hand open. It was a tracker.

"Who do you work for?"

"I work for the motel," he stammered.

"Why do you want to put a tracker on?"

"I was just told to put this underneath this car."

"By who?" Foote was angry now and glared at the man.

"A man named Colderon."

"He's dead. Did he promise you a reward?"

"Yes, sir," the scared man said. "Two thousand dollars. Every night I come out here and look for any new car that met his description."

“Well you can stop looking now. There’s not going to be any reward.”

“Okay.”

“Get out of here.”

The man bolted out of there and Wrenn came over. “Hey, Terry, shouldn’t we call Armstrong and let him decide what to do?”

“There’s nothing to do,” Foote said. “He doesn’t know anything. He’s just in it for the reward he’s never going to get anyway. He’ll probably try to call Colderon, but we both know Colderon isn’t going to be answering. Look, we got about forty-five minutes, then Ray and Cassandra relieve us and we can get some much needed shuteye.”



Everybody was off at the crack of dawn. They stopped at a roadside fuel and restaurant. Eugene went inside to grab some groceries. When he came out he went to Sandy’s car, but she was gone. The fuel pump was still in the gas tank. *That’s strange. Let me see if anyone knows where she went.*

He walked up to Armstrong’s car. He was still fueling up, but he was gone too. *They must have gone inside.* Eugene was headed for the restaurant when Ray came out.

“Ray, is Sandy inside?”

“No, I thought she was with you.”

Eugene went inside and found everyone else, but no Sandy, and no Armstrong.

Foote went to the station attendant, but the attendant stuck his head out of the window first. “Hey, you looking for two people?”

“Yes, did you see where they went?”

“Two guys went to each vehicle, and a man and a woman got out, and got in a black sedan.”

“Did you get the make and model? See their license plate?”

“No. It was a pretty new sedan; maybe a limo, like a Lincoln. I didn’t see the license plate.”

“Which way did they go?”

“There’s only one way to go—west.”

Foote got in Armstrong’s car while Cassandra drove Sandy’s car. There was no other choice. They had to find them. *Another needle in a haystack,*

Ray thought.

Eugene and Pamela followed them. Pamela could see that Eugene was worried. Since Sandy showed up she and Gene seemed to become close traveling companions. “Are you concerned about Sandy?”

“Of course. Armstrong too.”

Pamela smiled. “You care for her.”

Gene looked surprised. “I guess there is a certain amount of attraction, but it’s more than that. She reminded me of Fernando. You should have heard the way he talked about her; how loving and kind she was. Her change was not her fault. They stuck her in that awful place. They changed her.” He paused and thought a moment.

“Something else too. I can’t put my finger on it, but she reminds me of someone I used to know.”

“An old girlfriend?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” He was quiet for a little while and then cleared his throat. “She made me think of Catherine before Casimir got to her. How many lives has that bastard ruined? I shudder to think that he would do that to her again. I only spent about two or three days there—though it felt a lot longer—”

“It was,” Pamela said. Gene just stared at her incredulously. “According to Ray, they drugged you and brought you to Hell House on Saturday. It was Friday before they rescued you.”

“Friday? I know I was pretty much out of it at the time, but I thought it was only about three days.”

“Gene, you were there for almost a week.”

“Even a week can’t compare to the months that Sandy spent in there. I can’t imagine the horror of undergoing the brain probe hour after hour, day after day, week after week, and even month after month.”

“At least she’s with Armstrong.”

“Yeah,” said Eugene who then turned toward Pamela. “Why are things so fucked up? I understand the academic explanation, but I just can’t get my head around why this is happening. Why do people put up with it?”

“Why did you, Gene?” Eugene was taken aback by the remark and glared at Pamela. It was the second time she shook him up, but Pamela was unshaken. “What was your reaction to the things Cassandra was telling you?”

“That was different. She wanted me be a part of their revolutionary plan. I talked to Professor Zinney and he told me to get as far away from them as I could—Dennis too.”

“I know, Gene. And I don’t fault you for it. I’m just saying that if you want to know why no one is standing up for the promise of America, instead of what it has become, then ask yourself—before all this started happening to you—did you want to be a part of any meaningful change yourself?” Eugene knew she was right, but the criticism stung, nevertheless.

“How about that job offer you told me about? A quarter million dollar offer would have been difficult to turn down. Now, answer me honestly, Eugene. Would you have taken that job offer if you never met Cassandra or everything was fine with Catherine?”

Eugene hesitated. “I’m not sure.”

“You told me at Jeff’s motel that you would have. You knew what was happening to business. You knew about business expansion into things the Mafia used to be involved in, but you didn’t quit your job. You worked for the promotion offered to you.”

“Please don’t bring up that incident at the motel. I was out of my mind. I don’t know what I would have done.” Pamela looked at Eugene like she didn’t believe him. Eugene looked downcast. He knew Pamela was right to be suspicious of him. “Okay, I would have.”

“It’s okay, Gene. Anyone would have done the same.”

“No. Ray and Cassandra wouldn’t have. Neither would Armstrong or his sharpshooters.” Then Eugene looked over to Pamela. “And you too. Why didn’t you go over there? You said you don’t really make much money taking people to New America, and you don’t need the money anyway. So why do you risk your life doing it?”

Pamela didn’t answer right away. She looked pensive, and then glanced at Eugene. “Because I have to.” Eugene was perplexed. “I have to, Gene.” She looked sad, and Eugene began to worry he had opened some old wound.

“Gene, my brother, Redd, whom you remember so fondly, died because of me.”

“What?”

“For what I did.” She looked so forlorn, but Gene wanted to hear the story.

“Tell me, Pamela.”

“I was married to the man who assassinated him. We were young and in love. Then he started drinking and got really jealous of my brother’s success. He hated Redd. The irony is that my brother cared about him. He wanted to help him, but he wouldn’t or couldn’t help himself. We ended up divorcing, but his obsession with my brother only intensified. He wanted him dead. One day he succeeded.”

Eugene felt sad for her. He’d heard the story of Redd Piper’s assassination, but never realized that man was Pamela’s ex-husband.

“So, rather than have a nice life in the New World, I had to do penance—wanted to. My brother sacrificed his life to make a better world. Now I want to continue his work by bringing people over. I do it, Eugene, because I feel it’s my duty.”

Eugene could understand, though he felt bad that he always looked to others to be the heroes, while he just wanted to be happy and comfortable. “I just wish things were....”

“Gene, I know how you feel about things. I know you want the world to be like you always remembered it, but it wouldn’t last, and I have to believe that deep down somewhere you know that to be true. Please understand that this country has no future. It little understands its past. Your company has no future. It is with this country today. We’re being consumed by all the rot of its voracious, all-consuming appetite for power and control. NOGOV is squeezing the life out of this country. You see it every day in your business. It used to be that companies looked to expand; then, when they couldn’t expand anymore, they focused on cutting expenses—conserving and protecting what they had. But they couldn’t. They tried to keep wages as low as possible, eliminating the minimum wage law some twenty years ago. They made unions illegal. It kept profits up, but not for long. People with little money to spend aren’t buying enough to keep the profit flow going. Now those same companies are using drugs, gambling, and prostitution to keep going. Your job is to help them into these areas, and to figure out how to find new markets and innovative ways to make it work. And you would have, because you are very talented. But when you’ve squeezed the last drop out of that market, what’s left? Slavery? You’d be laid off, and your company would cease to function. I don’t know when this will happen, but it will.”

“So you’re saying that even if none of this happened to me, I’d still lose out in the end?”

“Everything that I just said occurred, not because of bad choices, but because they had to happen. Once you can’t expand, you have to protect what profits you have. To do that, one creates the very conditions that lead to this dead world. There is no future here, Eugene. There isn’t one for your father. There isn’t one for your uncle, and there isn’t one for Bo. At some point you’d be looking to make this journey. You’d make it or be swallowed up by the stink of a rotting nation. Ray and Cassandra knew that.”

“So why doesn’t society erupt? Why do they put up with it? Why isn’t there some journalistic investigation? Christ, you don’t even get the conspiracy nuts talking about it. ‘The government uses a brain probe to change your politics’. ‘A secret organization takes over the government.’ I mean something like that; but nothing. That idiot on TV just takes the damn thing, and uses it on kids to make money off it.”

“I know Professor Zinney, too, Eugene. He was my brother’s best friend. I asked him many of those same questions. He told me people erupt all the time. They demonstrate. They once seized the capitol building. The news never covered it. The police did, however. They beat the hell out of them, arrested them, and charged them with terrorism. Many of the leaders are still in prison. How many more people do you think want to copy them?”

Eugene realized that everything Pamela was telling him was true. He was supposed to be the business expert, but he never saw the long-term picture. Pamela, Ray, Cassandra, and the others did. While he mourned over a dead world and a life he could never have again, they were risking their lives to change it. He watched people sacrifice everything he refused to sacrifice, and knew that maybe he needed to do something too, instead of just complaining.

But would I do something? I can’t help it. I want my comfort back. I want to sit in my overstuffed leather recliner, sip my wine, and listen to Bach while Catherine makes dinner. I want her back. I want her to share my jokes about the pundits, and reassure me that everything is fine. I know those days are gone forever. I’ve accepted that. I’m going to New America, but I miss my old life. Oh, this is nonsense. I’m dreaming again. Why do I feel such comfort in a world gone to crap?

Eugene began sobbing. He couldn’t think about Catherine without depression overwhelming him. She glanced over to him. Part of her wanted

to pull over and give him a big motherly hug, but she said nothing. She had to find Chad and Sandy.

Pamela's phone rang. She listened with glowing satisfaction. Eugene looked at her and saw her smile. "That was Foote. Armstrong just called him. They're safe; just a little ways down the road."

Ten minutes later they were all at the side of the road by a black Lincoln. Sandy was clearly agitated. "Christ, is this the way it's going to be all the way to New America? First, the shootout at the motel, and now being kidnapped. I wish sometimes I never found out who I really was because I got to tell you guys, I don't know if I can take this much longer."

"I know how you feel, Sandy," Gene said.

Ray walked up to them. "Okay, Chad, let's hear the story."

"They searched me, but missed the knife in my shoe. They didn't bother to tie our hands together, but the guy in the passenger seat was supposed to keep an eye on us. He was waving his pistol while flirting with Sandy. With just enough distraction, I knew I could make my move."

"I thought he was going to kill me. I just kept seeing the barrel of that gun aimed at my head. Then Chad grabbed the steering wheel and held a knife to the driver's throat."

"What did the guy with the gun do?" Eugene asked.

"I threatened to kill us all if he shot Sandy," Chad said. "Just slit the driver's throat and drive us off the road. I sized these guys up as amateurs. I knew the guy with the gun wouldn't shoot. He looked like he never held a gun in his life. I made him hand over the gun to Sandy, then had them pull over right here."

"What made you go with them in the first place?" Ray asked.

"This guy came to my car asking for help with their car. When I got there Sandy was there. They gave her another bullshit story. Look, more to the point. How in hell did these guys know about us? Did anything happen in the parking lot last night?"

Foote and Wrenn just looked at each other. "Yeah," Foote said. Foote told Armstrong and the others what happened there. "There wasn't anything we could do, but I should have told you about it."

"And he didn't put any tracker on Pamela's car?" Armstrong said.

"No. I'm positive. What must have happened is that the guy called Colderon anyway."

"No one would have answered," Cassandra said.

“Then how do you explain the kidnapping?” Chad asked.

“More guys watching the rest stop,” Cassandra said.

“I’m not buying it. They would have tried to do the same thing as the kid at the motel. This required planning. They were waiting for us. They knew where we were going and when we’d get there.”

“I know what’s going on,” Ray said. They all looked at him. “I should have realized it. Casimir has done it before. He can have someone’s phone number forwarded to headquarters. If the motel guy called Colderon, he may very well have reached my brother.”

“If that’s true,” Armstrong said, “our killing Colderon didn’t do any good at all. Every place we might stop, there will be spies, all looking for a reward.”

“I have an idea,” volunteered Pamela. “I’m supposed to be the expert in navigating us to New America. Now I can finally earn my fee. All we have to do is get to my friend’s house in Idaho.”

“Is that the housekeeper you told me about before?” Eugene asked.

“Exactly! Her name is Jeanne. She was my grandfather’s housekeeper. I gave her some of my inheritance so she’d have a comfortable retirement. She lives in Midmountain, near the Snake River. It’s about five hundred miles from here, but only about two hundred miles or so from the border with New America.”

“That will mean one more fill-up,” Chad said. “What’s there, about three hundred miles from here?”

She checked her maps and found a small town in neutral territory. “All right, we’ll aim for there,” Chad said. “Everyone stick together. Stick to fifty miles an hour and ride the right lane. We have to make the gas last. No stopping at any more motels on the way. Anyone have any questions?”

No one did.

“All right, Pilgrims, saddle up!”

CHAPTER 22

THE CONQUEROR

The new pilgrims had been driving for about an hour when suddenly they heard the whistles of the Lightning Squad. They had triangulated Sandy, the last car in the queue. They all pulled over and watched in horror as the squad leader pulled Sandy from her car and forced her onto his bike. Armstrong called over to Pamela. “Are we in Squad territory?”

“No, Chad. This is neutral territory, but the police side with both paramilitary organizations. They won’t stand up to the Squad. The police are known to look the other way when they show up.”

Chad told Pamela and Eugene to get in the car and be prepared to drive out on Armstrong’s command. Eugene hesitated. “You too, Eugene,” he said. Then he turned to Ray, Cassandra, and his two sharpshooters. He said softly to them, “You guys still remember how to triangulate?” They all grinned. “Watch for my signal. Don’t make a move until you see it. Ray and Cassandra—you take lead point. Wrenn and Foote—you take midpoint. On my signal.”

The squad leader knew Armstrong was up to something, but not what. He turned to his pointmen and told them to be on their guard. Then he turned to Armstrong. “Now, where’s Eugene, Armstrong? That’s right. I know your name. I’ll betcha right now you kind of wished you’d killed those two yokels. I strapped a tracker to the ankle of one of those guys. We came and got them as soon as you left. We followed you the whole way.” The squad leader cackled, right along with the other two men.

Armstrong stood about fifty feet away, just in front of the forward pointman. He had a smirk on his face and cocked his head a bit. “Well, it seems that you have an advantage over me. You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

The squad leader gleaned his yellowish rotting teeth, looking behind him to the trailing pointman, and then back up to Armstrong. “Pizzaro’s the name. Just like the conqueror.” His pointmen just guffawed. They sat

comfortably on their bikes; their weapons sitting on their laps. Armstrong stood empty-handed in front of Pizzaro and about twenty feet in front of the forward pointman.

“Guess you’re probably saying to yourself, ‘but I didn’t see any bikes.’” More laughter. “We had the bikes in a van. We passed you a short while ago and got the bikes out. Then surprised the girl. Now, down to some business. Where’s Eugene?”

“Hand over Sandy, first,” Armstrong said, calmly.

Pizzaro smiled at him. “You’re in no position to make demands.” Then he looked around, grinning. He looked at his men, sitting comfortably on their bikes, rifles out, and hands on the trigger. Then he looked at unarmed Armstrong standing in the open, and the scared faces of those still in the car. “I could cut you down right where you stand.”

“Your men should have you on suicide watch.”

Pizzaro enjoyed that one, flashing his decayed teeth while squealing wheels moved into place. He didn’t know what was happening at first, but Armstrong gladly informed him. “You’ve been triangulated, Mr. Conqueror.”

Pizzaro wasn’t grinning. He was positively angry. He climbed off his bike abruptly, grabbing Sandy brusquely, holding her tight to his chest.

“What’s your plan, Armstrong? You shoot, you might hit the girl. Even if you miss her, my boys won’t. She’s a honey, isn’t she?” He caressed her breasts.

“Cut it out, Pizzaro. She’s more woman than you could ever handle.” Pizzaro’s men began howling.

“You want me to stop? Get me Eugene.”

“Can’t do that.”

“Suit yourself, Armstrong. The longer you take, the more fun for me.” Once again, his men laughed. Then he turned to them. “Anyone want to see a live sex act right here by the side of the road?” His pointmen shouted and yelled, “Do it, Sevi.”

Pizzaro just stared at Armstrong, flashing those rotting teeth as he grabbed the inside of Sandy’s left leg. Then he rubbed all the way up to her crotch. She looked up, her face red and angry.

“Stop!” cried Armstrong. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m getting ready to fuck the bitch.”

Armstrong wasn't sure what to do. His men could easily take them out but Sandy would probably die. If there was any doubt Pizzaro flashed a blade and put it at her throat.

"Get me Eugene."

"All right, but put the knife away."

Pizzaro just grinned. "Okay."

Armstrong walked back to Pamela's car. "Where's Eugene?"

"I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. He took the Berretta you gave him from the glove compartment, and got out of the car. Then he ran into the woods. I don't know what he's planning. He didn't say anything to me about it."

"Damn. That fool wants to play hero. Christ, what a mess now. There's no telling what that creep will do if I don't come back with Eugene."

"You mean you'd trade Gene for Sandy? What kind of deal is that?"

"Not trade. I won't do that. I need to stall for time. My men will take those guys out when they can get a clear shot and when they can be assured of Sandy's safety."

"How will they know when she's safe?"

"I can't answer that. They're pros. They'll know."

"What's the holdup, Armstrong? You planning something? Of course you are. Well we got plans too."

Armstrong came back to the spot he occupied before, *sans* Eugene Sulke. "He's gone. I don't know where he went."

"He ran into the woods," his rear pointman said.

"Ohhhhhh, he wants to be a hero, methinks." He turned around and his men were howling. "Is that true, Eugene?" turning to the woods. "You want to play hero? Rescue the señora? Well, now's your chance. Come over here and tell me to stop fucking with her, and I will. All you have to do is come here and tell me to stop."

"I don't think he wants you to stop," the forward pointman said. The other pointman laughed again.

"That true, Eugene? You want me to continue?"

"Hey, boss," from the rear pointman, "maybe you should let him see her tits." The guffawing continued.

"That right, Gene? You just want to see some titties?" He reached around Sandy and ripped open her shirt. With his knife he cut off her bra and exposed her breasts. He turned her toward the woods. "There you go,

Genie, my man. Take a gander at those gazongas.” He grabbed hold of her left breast and began fondling and shaking it. “How’s that Genie, my man? You’ve been dreaming of these tits haven’t you? Come on over here and have a taste.” He paused, looking at his men, grinning. “What’s that? You want me to taste them first?” The men howled again. Armstrong had no choice but to watch and wait for his opportunity.

Pizzaro put his hot breath in Sandy’s face. His breath reeked. Sandy fought back anger and tears. Pizzaro put his mouth over the nipple and suckled it.

“Ahhhh! Oh, Genie, you got to taste this. Just like the fine wine you like to drink.”

Eugene was only about ten feet from Sandy, hiding behind a tree. He knew what was going on, and he was determined to stop it. He tucked the Beretta in his pants while he tried to think of a plan. He kept picturing Catherine at Jaydin Casimir’s hands—helpless, and he, clueless. Not this time, though. This time he knew exactly what was going on, and he was determined that this time the guy would lose.

“Stop it!” Eugene heard himself yelling. It was a futile plea and he knew it. It was a threat that he expected to die executing; yet he knew there was no turning back.

“Oh, you want me to stop?” The men laughed.

“Well, just come on over here, and tell me to stop. I promise I will.” Pizzaro paused. “I’m not hearing anything from you, Gene. I don’t hear the crunching of dead leaves or some twigs on the ground. No, I don’t think you’re coming. If not, then I guess I should continue.”

“Do her, Sevi,” the rear pointman yelled.

“You want me to do her, Genie my man? Is that what you’re waiting for?” He reached around her waist and unbuttoned her jeans. He pulled down her zipper and put his hands under her pants, pulling them down to the knees. Then, with his right hand, he put the knife right over her panties and slid the dull side of the blade down slowly to her crotch; then turned it over to the sharp side, and held it there.

Sandy was doing her best to fight back the tears welling up inside her.

I have to be calm, my opportunity will come, she thought.

Then, suddenly, Pizzaro grabbed the panties and pulled them down. He then turned Sandy toward the woods. “Hey, Gene—get a gander of that twat

will you.” The men continued laughing. The sharpshooters’ trigger fingers were getting itchy.

“You like that, Gene? What’s that you say? Too much pubic hair? Spoils the view?” Pizzaro and his men laughed.

“Hey, boss,” the forward pointman said, “I think he’s taking pictures back there.”

The other pointman spoke up. “Sevi, I think he wants a better view.”

“You want a better view, Genie? Oh, sure, I understand.” He turned Sandy toward the road. There were occasional honks from the passing cars, but still no police. Pizzaro bent Sandy over with her butt facing Eugene. Then he spanked her a couple times to the howling men. “Get a good look at that twat, Genie. How do ya like it now?” Pizzaro looked up like he was showing off his new trophy. Then he reached down and grabbed her vagina, rubbing it. “Just getting it ready for my big cock.”

“Leave her alone!” came the mournful scream from the woods.

“You know what to do,” Pizzaro said, not hollering, but softly, as if he were too busy contemplating his anticipated adventure. He then turned Sandy around so her behind faced him. Then he undid his own pants and pulled everything down.

Eugene saw what was happening, and he was about to surrender himself, then stopped. He looked at Pizzaro with his pants down and saw an opportunity.

Pizzaro grabbed Sandy’s left hand and forced it on his penis. “How does that feel, babe? You like it? You want daddy Sevi to do you now, huh?”

His two buddies were really whooping it up now. There was an occasional shout from the traffic. One guy even stopped for a better look, but a warning shot from one of the Blues let him know to move on.

Pizzaro rubbed Sandy’s vagina again and then shoved his cock into her; hard, brutal; with a desire to inflict pain. Then in and out, in and out, again and again. Sandy stuck a clenched fist in her mouth. She did not want to cry out.

All at once Pizzaro stopped to raise his arms in triumph; turning around to his men, who continued to howl. He never even noticed Eugene speeding out of the woods, grabbing Sandy and, while lifting her off the ground, headed back to the woods. In the roughly two seconds this happened both pointmen lie dead, and a surprised and stunned Pizzaro stared at a 9-millimeter Berretta pointed at him...then lowered. Before he had a chance

to react he felt a sharp sting. When he looked down, there was just a red patch where his privies used to be. He stared at Armstrong, pointing the Beretta at him; then everything went black as he collapsed to the dirt and gravel at the side of the road.

Armstrong rushed into the woods where he found Gene and Sandy arm in arm. Sandy was still exposed, and when she realized it, Armstrong and Eugene turned away while she pulled her pants back up and folded her arms around her breasts. Armstrong came out of the woods. Pamela rushed over as did Ray and Cassandra from the rear point. The two Blues sharpshooters, Wrenn and Foote, drove across the roadway to this side of the road and came out. They all clapped and smiled as the three came out of the woods, and everyone crowded together.

“Well, Eugene,” Armstrong said, “a bit reckless, but well-done.”

“Gene, you scared me so,” Pamela said.

Then Sandy scolded him. “What were you thinking, Gene? You could have been killed.”

Gene retorted, “Maybe I’ve seen the Blues in action too much, but I knew they needed separation between you and Pizzaro. I figured we’d both be killed if something didn’t happen.”

Wrenn and Foote came over, each with grins on their faces. Then Wrenn spoke. “That was awesome, dude. Where’d you learn to do that?”

They all started laughing. Even Pamela cracked a grin. Finally, all the emotion that Sandy held back during her time of shame and humiliation came pouring out of her in raptures of sorrow and relief. Tears streamed down her face, while Pamela put Sandra’s shirt back on. She tucked it in, and even though everyone showed her great support, part of her was ready to run in shame. Then came the realization that they were in full view of witnesses with three dead bodies around them. “We need to get out of here now,” Armstrong said.

“Sandy, you stay in the middle. You take the lead, Pamela, and I’ll follow you. Wrenn, Foote, and the O’Reilly’s—you trail behind. No one is going to get the drop on any one of us again. All right, people—we got one fueling stop and then strait to Midmountain, Idaho.”

CHAPTER 23:

ANOTHER ONE FLEES

Horace Hayfield was being harassed by the parents of the children he treated. It seemed the little tykes were waking up in the middle of the night screaming, and talking about sticks touching them, and hurting. It didn't make too much sense to the parents at first, but after the Miller family took their youngster to a child psychologist, they believed there was a connection with Hayfield's camp. After several other families revealed their children were having nightmares, the police were called in to question Hayfield. Since this threatened to unravel everything the government was doing with the brain probe, the investigation was terminated, and it became a civil affair in which Hayfield was being sued by the parents.

For Hayfield, the problem was only just beginning. When the Commandant's wife went missing after having nightmares and yelling her first husband's name in her sleep—the husband she wasn't supposed to remember anymore—Hayfield knew it was only a matter of time before he'd be killed by government agents—probably by Jaydan Casimir. He knew Eugene Sulke was being hunted down and he knew how badly the government wanted this whole Brain Probe Project to be covered up. So Horace made the decision to flee.

The issue for Hayfield was how to get away. He was able to get a work visa in New America and he had an exit visa stamped on his passport. He tried to schedule a flight to New America only to be told all flights there were canceled. Then he tried to take a bus there, but all trips to New America had been canceled. It appeared that driving was the only way to get there. So he gathered his essentials, put his house up for sale, and took off in his two year old Mercedes for the New World.

He took Rte. 80 westward and moved up the coastal highway, which went into New America. About a mile from the border the highway closed at the last exit ramp just short of the border. All the side roads into the new

state of North California were closed—sometimes only a block or so from the border.

“The border is sealed,” the guard said. “No one gets in or out on orders from the President.”

Hayfield spent about a month trying to find an access point. He rented a motorboat and tried to enter North California from the sea, only to be turned back by the Coast Guard. Then he heard about a small airport where a pilot had taken other people to Portland, Oregon. They paid a thousand dollar fee to the Piper Air Club, which provided tours of New America as seen from the air. Before the restrictions that began three years ago, they used to land businessmen there to conduct their trade.

When New America was accused of violating its agreement with the United States—though few people knew why—the government broke off trade relations. Sanctions continued to be added until the point was reached where all access to the new country was blocked. The mail service was not allowed to bring mail in or out, and Canada was promised sanctions against them if it did not cooperate with the U.S. Internet sites were blocked in and out of New America, and various other restrictions virtually sealed off the new country from the rest of the world.

New America found ways around the restrictions, such as using a network of other countries that could relay communications to people in the United States, and even a rudimentary underground trading system was set up; but the U.S. Government estimated that about ninety percent of communications with New America were successfully blocked.

This was the situation facing Horace Hayfield as he tried to escape from Old America. His contact at the Piper Air Club was Sadie Meriwether, who used to live in the state of North California. She tried to start an air show, but went to work for the Club when her business failed. In her mid-forties, she never married and became the featured pilot when it came to taking businessmen to various cities in New America. When the restrictions came, the Club revised their business plan. They began taking tourists on overland trips to New America. The government approved this so long as they didn’t land.

“Hello, Miss Meriwether,” Horace said.

“Sadie, please,” she said as they shook hands. Sadie had her own office. It was small, but comfortable.

Horace leaned across the desk, indicating he didn't want to be overheard by anyone. "I understand you can land people in Portland."

Sadie looked up, surprised. She had done so in the past for a hefty fee, but things were different now. "May I ask why you want to emigrate?"

"Let's just say my life depends on it," Horace said. "How much will it cost and when can we leave?"

Sadie didn't answer at first. She stared at her desk and took a deep breath. "My fee is ten thousand dollars."

Horace was surprised. "I was told it was about one thousand."

"One thousand dollars is the fee for the tourist flight."

"What if you didn't land? What if I parachuted out of the plane?"

"That was done once before that I know of. The pilot came back without his passenger. Questions were asked. That pilot lost his license, paid a hefty fine, and served a short prison stretch." Horace just looked on matter-of-factly.

"What other options do I have?"

"If I take you there, we'd land. Then I could never go back. I lose everything. I wouldn't even consider it except that New America is a great place. I planned to go back there someday. Can you be ready in a week?"

"I'm ready right now."

"I need a week to make my own plans. Meet me here this same time next Tuesday."

"Okay."

"I need the money tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow or there is no deal. You said you were ready right now, or did I misunderstand you?"

"Fine."

Horace would have to sell his car. When the day of his departure arrived, Horace went to Sadie's office, but she wasn't there. He asked around and somebody mentioned that she was arrested. *Oh my God*, he thought, *we were found out*.

Just then a man walked up to him. "Mr. Hayfield?"

"Yes."

The man showed Horace his badge and identified himself as Detective Ferris. "Mr. Hayfield, you're under arrest for espionage." Hayfield froze.



At the local precinct in Salinas, Detective Ferris tried to question Hayfield, but Horace was a savvy businessman who knew never to answer questions without his lawyer being present. A frustrated Ferris shoved the phone over to him and told him to call. Hayfield preferred his own mobile phone, which had his lawyer's contact information. His lawyer promised him a reference to a local attorney, who then called Hayfield and promised he'd be there in the morning. Horace was taken to a cell and told he'd stay there until he was ready to talk to the detective.

The next morning a man identifying himself as Stuart Hessfield showed up and got Hayfield out on bail, but he would have to answer some questions. Stu promised he'd be there with him.

Detective Ferris interrogated Hayfield for several hours about why he was leaving Old America, what he was going to do in Portland, and when he was planning on returning. Hayfield answered all the questions truthfully and the district attorney was satisfied that he wasn't a spy. Nevertheless, he was told not to make any more attempts to enter New America or he'd be re-arrested.

Hayfield was curious as to how he was suspected in the first place. Detective Ferris smiled and said he'd seen a lot of people try to sneak across the border over the past three years. "First they find the border is blocked, then they try to sneak across, by air, boat, or their feet. To do this, they have to sell their possessions that they couldn't carry. We've alerted all the auto dealers and pawn shops in the area to call the police whenever a customer wants to dump their car instead of trading it in. That's what happened with you. The dealer bought your car, called me, and figured you'd be let out within a few days. He has your car all set to resell it back to you for a nice tidy profit for himself."

"But Sadie?"

"Same thing with her. When she tried to sell off everything we picked her up."

That son of a bitch, thought Hayfield. It's a fucking racket they got going here. Damn, I wished I'd thought of it.

Hayfield bought his car back and his luggage was still in his old room. He was out the ten thousand dollars he gave Sadie Meriwether, and a few grand more to the dealership. Furthermore, he was back to square one, still trying to figure a way across the border, and not much wiser for the effort.

Next, he went to the boatyard to see if someone could carry him to any shore in New America. He talked to a man named Phillips and asked him how much he'd take for the job.

"Nothing," was his answer. "I've had two men take a few thousand dollars for the job. They left in the middle of the night; just a five mile trip across the border. The first guy to try it was chased by the Coast Guard and arrested. The second guy was shot and his boat exploded. You won't find anyone else around here who will take the chance."

Great! Now what am I going to do? Hayfield thought about it for a little while and concluded that maybe there were better opportunities to get across from a different spot. So Horace got into his Mercedes and headed north, but it was the same situation. The roads to New America were all blocked.

He continued to move northward until he reached Idaho. Then he got on Route 86, and took it toward Piper City, where, once again, the roads were blocked. Horace thought he might be able to bribe a border guard. He approached the duty officer, but was chased out of there before he could even make an offer. He searched for side roads that might get him across, but mostly they dead ended. A frustrated Horace Hayfield stopped at a motel for the night and contemplated his next move when there was a knock at his door. He answered it, figuring it must be housekeeping, but a man he never saw before was standing there. Horace thought he looked kind of goofy.

"Are you looking for a way across the border?"

"Who are you? Who sent you? How do you know what I'm looking for?"

"May I come in? I can explain."

Hayfield let him in. He was tall and thin and walked with an odd gait. "My name is Milo. May I have a bottle of water, please?" Horace gave him the water.

"May I have something to eat? I ain't et all day." Horace made him a sandwich, and then waited for the man to state his business.

"You're looking for a way in, right?"

“Let’s just say I am.”

Milo just nodded up and down as he wolfed down the sandwich. “I understand, sir. I know a way across.”

“Okay, I’m listening.” Horace was getting impatient. *Christ, finish the blasted sandwich and get on with it.*

“My fee is a thousand bucks.”

What, just one grand? Christ, all these hucksters. “How do I know that if I give you money you won’t just take off with it and leave me stranded somewhere?”

“I’ll take you there. You drive and I’ll show you where to go. I’ll take half now and the rest when we get there.”

Hayfield was hesitant to spend still more money. Yet, he knew he’d need somebody’s help. Hayfield was a self-made entrepreneur—mostly from commercial real estate. He had millions and he had to get across. “When will you be ready?” he said.

“I’m ready right now.”

“I have to get the cash. When is the best time to go?”

“Tonight—around midnight.”

“Be here then and I’ll be ready to go.”



Milo Hoopenmiller drove with Horace Hayfield, giving him directions, until they wound up at the end of a cul-de-sac in a neighborhood community. Just ahead was a forested area. Milo pointed to the trees. “It’s about three miles to the border.”

“You want me to walk through those trees in the middle of the night?”

“If you want to cross the border, that’s what you have to do. It shouldn’t take more than two hours. Just keep walking west.” Then he looked up at the sky. “You see that group of stars? Just keep walking toward it and you’ll be fine.”

“What am I supposed to do with my car?”

“Leave it. If you try to sell it, you’ll attract the police. If you get turned back the car will still be here. Now, my other five hundred.”

It might not be the bargain Hayfield wanted, but he gave him the cash and got out. Milo did the same. “Would you call a cab for me?” Milo asked.

It was about 1:30 a.m. before Horace started out. He didn't like it; in fact, he was downright scared. He was especially afraid when he looked up for those stars and saw only the tops of the trees. There was no pathway and he was constantly tripping over loose branches, roots, and banging into limbs he didn't see. He couldn't be sure he didn't get turned around. He remembered something about how one could tell direction in a forest by the sides of the tree that moss was growing on, but he couldn't see the moss, and couldn't remember what direction it grew on anyway.

It was now 3:30 a.m. and all he could see were more trees. He sat down and leaned against a pine tree, envisioning the forest going on forever. He imagined somebody finding his rotted body, still leaning against this tree, generations from now.

Did I sleep? He looked at his watch. It was going on four o'clock. *Got to keep moving.* He got up, hoped he was going in the right direction, and started walking. After about twenty more minutes he came to a clearing, but there was a wire fence in his way. He started climbing the fence but then there was a shout. He stopped for a moment, wondering if it was his imagination or not. Then, he heard a distinct voice to his left. He heard footsteps. Somebody was running toward him. He started climbing again. Somehow, he imagined that freedom existed on the other side of that fence. The shouts grew louder. He was tired. Maybe that's what caused his foot to slip on the fence. He tried again but he felt arms wrapping around his legs. He was pulled down suddenly and violently. The sharp edges of the top of the fence ripped into his left breast, making a gash as he was pulled into the clutches of a burly man.

With a Scottish brogue the man said, "Where do you think yer goin' laddie? No one's permitted on the other side of the fence." He held his left arm in a locked position and began leading him to a second man, who grabbed hold of Horace's other arm. They were held in locked position until they got to a golf cart. Horace was handcuffed to the cart and they drove down a pathway for several hundred feet. Then the path widened and they came to a cul-de-sac where more men and a police cruiser were standing by.

Horace was transferred to the cruiser and taken to jail, where he was then interrogated. Once more, Horace demanded a lawyer, but one could not get there before later that morning.

That afternoon, an attorney by the name of Nathan Phillips entered his cell. "Good afternoon, Mr. Hayfield."

Phillips sat on the cot next to Hayfield, and Phillips told him he was in trouble. “The D.A. learned about your misadventure in California. Overnight you were identified as the same man who tried to enter the CSA illegally. They want to try you for espionage. It’s bogus, but the judges demonstrated in the past that they are going to hear such cases.”

“Jesus Christ, whatever happened to freedom in this country?”

“Folks say they still have it, but the law is the law. I have a duty to uphold it, even the parts I disagree with, such as this situation, and what you’re being charged with.”

I’m screwed! thought Horace.

“I think I have a way out of this, however. I need a little more time to make a strong case. I need you to be patient for a few days. Whatever you do, don’t talk to the police. Even if they tell you that you can go straight home if you answer their questions, don’t believe them. Just wait a few days until I come for you. Even if they try and bait you into believing I won’t be coming back, don’t believe them.”

“They’d do that?”

“They can and have.”



For the next four days Horace Hayfield was confined to a holding cell at the precinct. He believed in Phillips—that he would come back—but each day felt like a lifetime. He was allowed out after two days to shower, but then taken back into his cell. He got two meals a day. They weren’t very satisfying, and he was hungry all the time. Finally, a guard came to his cell and let him out.

Horace was escorted to the duty officer, where Phillips was standing. He was smiling. “You’re a free man, Mr. Hayfield. We just have to have you sign a couple things.”

The duty officer gave him a bag with his personal things. “Sign here,” he said.

Then Phillips gave him another document that said he must not attempt to climb that fence again. He signed it.

Phillips led Hayfield outside. As they walked down the steps to a waiting cab, Phillips said, “We need to get you out of the country. Don’t say

anything yet.”



In Phillips’s office, Horace sat down. “That spiel the other day about how most people have no problem with freedom was for the sake of open ears. People will listen to what any lawyer has to say. What I told you was bullshit. There is no freedom to say what you think in this country. People have disappeared after mouthing off about government.”

“What do you know about my situation?” Horace said. “You know somethin’. You know more than you’re tellin’ me.”

“You’re right, I do. I know about your summer camp for bad children. I know you used the brain probe to change their behavior. This was a secret government program. A man named Grifton invented it. He was given financial support by another man named Schmidt. The government let paramilitary groups in on it in exchange for their protection. When Dr. Schmidt and Dr. Grifton sold the machine to you everyone was pissed, but didn’t know what to do. They were willing to let things go until your patients began reliving their treatment. Then the shit started.

“They wanted Schmidt and Grifton to fix the problem, but Grifton suffered an accident that harmed his mind. He was the brains behind it. As more people started remembering, demands were put on the Congress to investigate. The Justice Department got involved—well, everything began unraveling.”

“They want me, right?”

“I think you know that. That’s why you’re so desperate to get across the border.”

“I got people suin’ me, and I figured sooner or later those government thugs would be after me as well,” Horace said.

“They were initially after Schmidt and Grifton. There’s an organization called NOGOV that is the de facto government in this country. The nominal government does what NOGOV wants. With everything concerning the Brain Probe Program coming undone NOGOV gave the order to cover up the whole program; deny its existence. Anyone who had first-hand knowledge of it was meant to disappear. Schmidt and Grifton knew this and tried to run. They were killed by mercenaries. More of them are on the run.”

“Including me.”

“Yes. There’s going to be a bounty on your head as soon as they find out you’re missing. They don’t know yet, which is why you were let out of jail. But they will soon be after you.”

“How did you get me out?” Horace asked. “You said you had an idea.”

“According to the treaty with the CSA—that’s the Cooperative States of America—once you are on their side, you are free. No one can capture you and bring you back to Old America. I argued that since part of your hand touched the back of the fence, you were in CSA territory and were illegally pulled back into Old America.

“Now the D.A. wasn’t buying that argument, but in a trial our government could get a black eye over such allegations. I argued that I would drop a lawsuit against the county in exchange for your freedom. They bought it.”

“Thanks, but my life depends on me gettin’ out of the country. So, how do I get out of here?”

“I have an idea on that as well, but it will involve a lot of money, about a hundred grand. You have that kind of money?”

“Jesus. I guess so. I’ll need to withdraw money from the brokerage house that has most of it.”

“Good. Let’s get started.”

He turned his computer around and put his browser on the screen. Hayfield began typing and, after a minute or so, reached his brokerage house. He clicked on the sell button. The screen indicated the stock sold, number of shares, and balance. It showed more than one hundred thirty grand. He then withdrew a hundred grand, to be transferred to his bank account. The screen displayed a dialog box indicating he must call the firm to complete the withdrawal.

He reached for his phone and dialed the number on the screen. It took several minutes to reach a live voice. He mentioned the dialog box and gave his name and account number. The person at the other end told him his account was being frozen on orders from the Justice Department. It seemed they wanted to question him first.

Horace looked frightened. “Well they’re officially after me now. I have about a thousand dollars in cash and my car.”

“Getting cash for your car adds to the risk. We need the money—hush money, bribery, and incidentals. Anything less adds to the risk.”

Both sat staring at each other. Then, Phillips spoke up. “I have an idea, but I need to make some calls first. I’ll drive you to your car. Hopefully it’s still parked where you left it. Go back to your room and wait for me to call you.”



The next day Phillips called Hayfield, and he drove out to the office. “Okay, Horace, I’ve got some good news. I think we can get you to freedom. Have you ever heard of a senator named Everson Moore?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“He’s more familiarly known as Ev Moore. Anyway, he used to work closely with another person you may have heard of—Pamela Piper.”

Horace just shrugged.

“She’s the sister of Redmond Piper. Does that name ring a bell?”

“Of course. Everyone knows who he is.”

“Well, Pamela had been working with Senator Moore in helping people escape Old America. She is currently leading a number of people out of the country and is currently in Idaho. Mr. Moore just talked to her. They can provide the money we need to get everyone across the border.”

“Great! What’s the plan?”

“I’ll tell you when the others come. Do you have enough money to stay where you are for about another week?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“A week is all we need. It may not even take that long. Look, Horace, I’m not going to kid you. This is going to be risky. There’s a chance we’ll all be killed.”

CHAPTER 24:

THE ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR GAMBLE

“Everybody up,” yelled Pamela Piper to the pilgrims. “Assemble in the front room.”

Tired bodies, shaking off forgotten dreams, rubbed their eyes, looked for the coffee, and began to waken.

Ray and Cassandra were out on the porch standing guard. They, too, were called in.

Everyone gathered there, grumbling. “What’s wrong?” Eugene asked.

“I’ve got coffee brewing, but I need to tell you something important first.”

“Does this have something to do with Hogs or the Squad?” Armstrong asked.

“No, this is different. It’s good. It’s the opportunity to escape that we’ve been looking for.”

“Oh, tell us,” Sandy said. It’s some of the few words Sandy has uttered since the roadside incident.

“The man I had in government—the man who made it possible for me to escort all of you out of the country had disappeared. He had an exit visa and a plane was ready to take him and his wife to New America. What I only learned a few minutes ago was that he was shot and presumed killed. He was taken to a local hospital and pronounced dead. The government was, or feigned, shock; and a private funeral was held by the family.”

“Oh, my God,” Sandy said. “What is supposed to be the good news?”

“He isn’t dead,” Pamela said. “His wounds were only superficial. The story of his death was concocted to throw his pursuers off the scent. He’s being escorted to Martinville, Idaho. It’s near the border. That’s where we’re going to go. We’ll be meeting with another man who is being persecuted. There’s an attorney who has a plan to get us all out of the country, but it’s going to be expensive.”

“Of course it’s going to be expensive,” Eugene said, sounding frustrated. The rest of the group expressed cynicism.

“We need a hundred thousand dollars.”

There was wide-spread derision from the group. Most were broke. Pamela still had most of the 100,000 given to her, and Chad Armstrong could come up with about ten grand. Foote and Wrenn together could come up with another ten grand, but they were still about ten thousand short counting money for food and gas to get there.

“I have some money,” Jeanne said. “I’ll have to go to the bank.” So did the others. They managed to scrape up the money and had a nice brunch.

Pamela told them some more information. “Most of my money is actually in the New World. It was where I always intended to live. When the government enacted its trade barrier there could be no banking transactions with New America anymore. The money I get from people I escort over the border is mostly used to fund the operation. The little money I have left for myself isn’t much. I’m pretty much going to be out of money after we turn this money over to the lawyer who’s running this little operation.”

“Have you ever had difficulties like this with your other clients?” Ray asked.

“Nothing like this. The task is still difficult, and it’s my friends on both sides of the border that have allowed people to escape persecution here, but now security has been stepped up to the point where it is very difficult to get across. I only agreed to this hundred grand deal because I’m very afraid I can’t get you out. If we’re successful, however, I’ll reimburse you all the money you’ve given me. I have millions in the New World.”

“Well, what is the plan this lawyer has?” Eugene said.

“I don’t know. All I know is that we are to drive to Martinville, and everything will be explained when we get there.”

“When are we supposed to leave?” Armstrong said.

“Now.”



The trip to Martinville was uneventful and only took a few hours, as much of the journey was through neutral territory. Everyone assembled in the

Lazy Tourist Inn and began getting to know one another. Problems began, however, when Horace Hayfield introduced himself to Eugene Sulke.

Everyone responded to a fight that broke out by the pool. A table was overturned, a glass was broken, a plant crushed, and two people had to be treated for cuts and bruises. Eugene was still livid. “That man can’t go with us.” He kept shouting while pointing his finger at Horace Hayfield.

The front office was about to call the police, but Chad Armstrong was able to calm the manager down and gave him money to pay for any broken items. The poolside was cleaned up and management was satisfied. Ray and Cassandra escorted Eugene away from the scene of the fracas and demanded an explanation.

Eugene explained who Horace Hayfield was and how he recognized him from the TV commercial that almost caused him to wreck his room so many weeks ago. Cassandra just laughed and Ray made a face.

“Look, Gene,” Ray said, “I understand how you feel.”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

“Please, Gene, listen to Ray,” Cassandra said.

It took Eugene about fifteen minutes to calm down. “Just keep me away from that son of a bitch.”

“Sure. Count on it,” Ray said as Chad came over.

“Look,” Armstrong said, “I felt the same about those two doctors as well, but we can’t fuck this up. We have to get over the border and we can’t afford for anything to go wrong. Now get a grip, Gene. We’ll keep you two apart the best we can, but when we can’t, just let it go. Okay?”

Gene pouted, but agreed.



Later that day, Nate Phillips came to the motel. He escorted all of them to his office, where they could talk in private. Everyone sat in the large conference room.

“I’m going to fill you in on the plan I have for getting you across the border. We are about eight miles from it right now, and we’ll be walking in difficult conditions for up to two hours, but let me back up and start from the beginning. Let me go through it entirely before asking me any

questions. It's easier this way. When I'm finished, I'll be happy to take your questions and go over anything you don't understand."

Everyone was fine with that, eager to hear the plan.

"About a week or so ago, I met a man named Horace Hayfield. He was trying to find a way across the border when he met a man named Milo Hoopenmiller, who showed him a way to reach it. He charged Hayfield a thousand dollars, then drove with him to the spot where he'd have to get out and walk through a forest until he reached an unmanned fence—a border fence. On the other side was the New World. He was only a foot away when he began to climb the fence. What he didn't know was that Milo was only setting him up. He was working with authorities who arrested Horace. I got him out.

"Now, I want to introduce another man to you. He is U.S. Senator Everson Moore. Pamela knows him as the insider helping her escort her clients across the border. He disappeared, allegedly dead, but his death was faked. This is him," pointing to the man at the other end of the table from Phillips. "His wife successfully made it to New America. He's looking forward to joining her. All of you will shortly be going over that fence to freedom. Now I'll take your questions."

"I still don't know the details of our escape," Armstrong said.

"Let me just say that we can use Milo to provide assistance, as well as Horace Hayfield, who has already made the attempt. Now, I know what you're thinking. Can we trust Milo? My plan is to offer him more than he was getting, but staying with him so he can't tip anyone off."

Armstrong interrupted. "Why do we even need him? Hayfield knows the way."

"I can't remember the way," Hayfield said. "Milo had me making a lot of turns, and it was dark."

"Besides, Milo may get wind of another attempt and tip off the authorities," Phillips said. "We can't take chances. We need him."

Armstrong just shook his head and looked frustrated. He looked at his friends, Wrenn and Foote, who expressed similar unease about the plan. Armstrong spoke up. "I don't like it. It's been my experience that untrustworthy people stay that way." He paused and then continued. "Nevertheless, I think it was Machiavelli who said keep your friends close and your enemies closer. We may have no choice but to use Milo, but I can tell you I'll have my eye on him all the time. That means he escorts us, not

to just the jumping off point, but through the trees and right up to that damn fence. I want to keep my eye on him the whole way, and ready to slit that bastard's throat if the police show up."

The rest of the group applauded, and Phillips knew this scenario had to be included in his plans.



Three nights later, they were set to go. Armstrong drove in the lead vehicle with Milo handcuffed to the passenger door. It was midnight. Milo gave directions. He took them through twelve turns. The rest of the crew were keeping track of distance, turns, and roadways they took, just in case they would ever need to know. A few had a suspicion that this would not be a good idea.

They reached their destination an hour later. They decided to park their cars and trucks on different streets so any nosey late night neighbor wouldn't get suspicious. Then they all gathered at the edge of the woods and left on the next part of their odyssey.

No one was used to it. It taxed even the Blues. Pamela had an especially difficult time of it. She never envisioned getting to the border this way. Ray and Cassandra began cursing the woods. Foote and Wrenn told jokes to each other. Moore stoically tramped on and Hayfield mumbled to himself. Milo kept whining that he'd gone far enough, but he was handcuffed to Armstrong, and he led on.

"No breaks. We're not taking any chances of a delay that might cost us our liberty. We walk until we reach that damn fence." No one protested.

About 1:45 a.m. they reached the small clearing. They could see the fence. Then they saw two men, one with a gun. "Been waitin' for yah," the guy with the gun said. The ragtag group froze in disbelief.

"Milo," the man with a Scottish accent said, motioning for him to come over. Armstrong let him go. Milo ran over to them. Armstrong didn't feel surprised.

"Okay, laddies—oh, and a couple lassies—this way."

Armstrong motioned for them to come.

"Just a wee walk and then you get to sit down", the Scotsman said. "I know you must be tired from such a long walk."

His playful banter didn't faze Chad Armstrong any. Wrenn still had a grin on his face, while Foote kept looking at Armstrong. Ray understood.

"Come on, come on, folks," the Scotsman said.

"Anybody up for some T-ball?" Chad said to the others. Moore and Hayfield thought he was crazy. The others knew it was a signal.

"No time for games," the Scotsman said. "It's late and we—"

Scotty couldn't talk anymore. He was more concerned with the stiletto Foote held to his neck; not to mention the left arm wrapped around his head. The Blues flashed their own guns.

"Drop your gun," Armstrong said to the man with the rifle.

The man hesitated. "No. You, you, drop y' yer guns," the rifleman said.

Armstrong walked right in front of him, ignoring the barrel that was pointed at him. "Drop the pop gun. You kill me, and before you can cock that gun you'll be lying in a pool of blood...your own."

"Do it, Henry," Scotty implored.

He did. Foote then let him go. Armstrong took the gun from Henry. He then walked to the fence, pulling Henry along, and peered out. "What's out there?"

"Nothing. Just wh...what you see."

"For how long?"

Henry just shrugged. "For miles."

"About twenty-five miles," the Scotsman said.

"Tell him, Jack, about the hel...helicopter."

"Henry," Jack, the Scotsman, said in a condescending manner.

"Okay, Jack," Chad said. "Tell me about the helicopter."

"Most of the people in that neighborhood you parked your vehicles in know about the fence," Jack said. "Milo lives in the shack behind my house. They think freedom is just over that fence. It isn't. Never was. Every so often someone goes over the fence. We usually pick him up right away. We got some men over there. Then once every couple of weeks we fly a helicopter out there and load it up with the dead bodies of the—uh, pilgrims—who found that tasting freedom didn't mean quenching their thirst or putting food in their bellies. Most died of exhaustion and lack of water. Even in winter, when it's cool and you can eat the snow, you soon got tired. Lack of food saps your energy, the snow's too cold—you can't take it anymore."

“And the few who survive?” Armstrong said. “You just mow them down from the helicopter. Eh?”

“What are you going to do with us?”

“We’re not murderers, but we’re not a bunch of damn fools either. We’re going to tie you up to that fence, that freedom fence. Milo, too. Your relief will untie you.”

After a few minutes, it was time to make their way back through that hated forest. Pamela just stood by the fence, sobbing. Chad walked up to her. “Oh, Chad, are we ever going to make it?”

“Sure!”

Pamela just continued to stare at the scrub, the dirt, and the hills in the distance. “A hundred thousand dollars and we aren’t any better off now than we were.”

The irony wasn’t lost on Armstrong. “It’s an illusion. I’m sick of it. Sick of being misled and lied to. Sick of being hunted down. I’m tired of lawyers picking our pockets and leading us to an illusion. I’m sick of being directed by an idiot who keeps handing people off to the authorities. You know who our biggest enemy is? Ignorance. From now on we’re going to use that lawyer and that senator. We’re going to use them to get some facts—some real information. Then we’re going to use the truth to get across.”

Pamela stood looking up at Chad. He just looked at her with steely eyes. “We’ve come through hell so far only to stare at the face of the devil. Well, I’m going through and I’m taking you and anyone else who wants to come along. Didn’t Odysseus go through hell before he got home?”

CHAPTER 25:

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

The new pilgrims got back to the Lazy Tourist Inn around dawn, and went to their rooms for a long rest. The watch was set. Armstrong was the first to wake up at around nine. He made coffee and then called Phillips.

“Nate, this is Armstrong. I’m back at the motel.”

(Pause). “No. We didn’t get over. We got stopped. Somebody tipped off the authorities. That wasn’t the problem, however. They were amateurs. We overpowered them easily enough. The problem is that there’s nothing on the other side of that fence. Just desert.”

(Pause). “Listen to me!” Foote came in. Chad put the phone down and turned to him. “Phillips said we should just have gone over anyway.”

He picked up the phone again. “Phillips? You there?” There was a pause. “Not only is it just desert, but Old America’s got authorities over there just waiting to bring back any wayfarers. And if any escapees get past them they’re being picked up by U.S. copters—not alive, but dead.”

There was a delay as Armstrong listened to the lawyer. “No, that’s not going to happen.” Then he lowered the phone and talked to Foote. “He wants to get more information from Milo.”

“What?” he yelled.

“Look, Phillips. I’m tired of this nonsense. Grab a legal pad and pen and write this down. First, I want a map of the entire area five miles from the border, to a hundred miles on the other side. Then I want a close-up map of the border—about twenty-five miles north and the same distance south of our present latitude. Are you getting this?”

Phillips indicated he had.

“Now, I want maps from the border area we just discussed, but focused in on every road, side road, alleyway, and horse trail through or either side of the border. Got it?”

(Pause). “Good. I want it this time tomorrow.”

(Pause). “What? No don’t give me shit. You got a hundred grand of our money. You put everything aside and you come to the Lazy Tourist at nine sharp tomorrow morning.”

(Pause). “Huh?”

“Out of the question. You don’t want to make me mad. Do this and bring those maps to me.”

“Fine! Have some flunky bring them to me.”

“All right. Good-bye.”

Armstrong hung up and turned to Foote. “Oh, I got clients to see, and I have to be in court. I tell you, Terry, I’m about ready to break that lawyer’s kneecaps. All I can say is he better have those maps tomorrow, and after all the money he’s taken from us, he better not try to bill us, or so help me.... Terry, go rouse our senator.”

Ev Moore was sound asleep. He didn’t hear the knocking at the door. The knocking became a bit more insistent and still Moore snored away. Foote went back to his room and came back with a dumbbell. Now he made some real noise. Moore shot up wondering if there was an explosion. Then he heard Foote.

“Moore, you up?”

“What?” Moore tried to shake the sleep out.

“Get up, Moore!”

“What is it? Let me sleep,” he said groggily.

“No time. You want freedom, don’t you?”

“Right now, I want sleep.”

“You got five minutes. Come to Room 120, and don’t make me come back for you.”

Fifteen minutes later, Moore knocked on Armstrong’s door.

“Here, Ev. Good strong joe. No sugar and no milk; just caffeine.”

Moore took the coffee. He made a face after tasting it, and then set the coffee down, still feeling groggy. “Have you found another path to the border?”

“No,” Armstrong said. “We need information. You have Washington contacts. You’ve provided Pamela with information before. Now, we need some. I want to know who’s in CSA territory, and where they are. I want to know what we have to fear: Hogs, Squads, RACs, local authorities, etc. I want to know where they are and where they aren’t. I also want a copy of the treaty with CSA and the U.S.; what’s changed, and what kind of

sanctions exist. I want to know how we can get around a media blackout. Any questions?”

“I have most of that information for you, and Pamela has a way of communicating with her brother Henry on the other side.”

“Does most of that information consist of civilian authorities like we faced last night?”

“No, only formal authorities.”

“Can you get information on the informal authorities?”

“I doubt it. You’d need a spy for that.”

Armstrong had to think on that. “Okay, Ev, get me whatever you have.” Moore left.

“He’s probably right,” addressing his concern to Foote and Wrenn. Armstrong sat back in his chair while the other two just waited for his idea so they could execute it. Armstrong looked worried.



Eugene sat down to a sandwich and a bottle of wine. He had turned X News on when someone knocked. He thought it might be Pamela or Armstrong; maybe another meeting or someone with a new idea. When Eugene opened the door, there was Sandy.

“May I come in?”

Eugene was surprised. Sandy hadn’t spoken to him since that terrible day. “Sure, come in. I was just about to have a sandwich. Want one?”

“No, thanks, but I’ll have a glass of wine, if you don’t mind.”

Eugene poured her a glass. “I guess I am surprised to see you. We hadn’t spoken in a while.”

“I’m sorry about that. I try to not think about that day. I want to be my old self, but I think about it all the time. A man can’t know what I felt. You may think you do, but you can’t.”

“You mean I can’t empathize with you.” Sandy nodded. “You’re right. No man could.”

“The fear that I would be killed, and the shame of standing there butt naked in front of everyone...” Sandy was stressing. “...in front the goddamn traffic; horns blowing, people yelling out of their cars, and the fear that if the police came they might just arrest us. Jesus Christ, Gene. I

just wanted to die. I tried to be brave. I tried to plan my escape, but when Pizzaro pulled my pants down I couldn't run away. I didn't know what I could do. I kept waiting for Chad to do something and the next thing I know, you're flying out of the woods like some crazy guy." Sandy just paused to drink some of the wine, and then more before she just downed the whole glass and poured herself another one.

Eugene stared at her. "I'm glad you came, Sandy. You need to talk about this. Let me get you something to eat."

"No, thank you, Gene. I ate before I came here. Actually, I came here because of something else, something I heard."

Eugene was interested in what this 'something' was. He sat down in the chair at the table, opposite Sandy. "What?"

"Is your last name Sulke?"

"Yeah, I guess I thought you already knew that."

"No. Everyone just called you Gene. It was Pamela who mentioned it. I used to know a...." She changed her mind and redirected. "Did you grow up in Countryside, Illinois?"

"Sure. My parents still live there. Why do you ask?"

"Do you remember a little girl you used to like, Sandy Montgomery?" Eugene's eyes lit up.

"Oh my God! Sandy?"

Sandy just grinned and nodded. "Yeah."

"I do remember. I had such an odd sensation that I knew you from somewhere or that you reminded me of someone. Oh I had such a crush on you."

"I know. I felt the same way about you."

"Then you moved away. Gee, I think we were only about ten or twelve years old. Didn't you move to Decatur?"

"Springfield. My dad got a job with the state."

"I always hoped that you would write. I even hoped you'd come back again."

"I wanted to write—even started a few letters—but I never finished them. I figured, what was the use? I knew I'd never see you again. Dad said he was set for life. He bought a home and still lives there."

Eugene was reminiscing again. He smiled softly. "We had such fun back then. I remember the time we saw that children's movie. I can't remember

the name of it, just that it was animated, and it was about the bear that had no friends.”

“That’s right, I remember. After the movie you bought me a soda.”

“What are the odds that we’d find each other like this?”

“Practically zero. Yet here we are. We both experienced Hell House and we grew up in the same neighborhood. Oh, what time is it? There’s a movie I want to watch.”

“Stay here. I’ll watch it with you.” Sandy smiled. Eugene got up to microwave some popcorn.

After the movie, Sandy got up to leave. Eugene stood up and walked her to the door, and then Sandy turned to him, searchingly. “There’s something that I don’t understand, Gene.”

“What’s that?”

“We should be the same age, but you look much older. I don’t know, maybe ten or fifteen years older than me.” Eugene suddenly remembered about the disguise. He then let out a laugh.

“I had been wearing this for so long I forgot I had it on.”

Sandy looked perplexed.

“The makeup. I’m supposed to look older so I wouldn’t be spotted. But it doesn’t matter anymore. Wait just a few minutes. Sit down, Sandy. I want to show you what I really look like. It’ll only be about ten minutes.”

Sandy sat down in anticipation. Then she got up, mouth agape, and smiling. “Gene! Look at you!” She let out a laugh.

“Do I look any different?” he asked, playfully. Gene had lost most of his potbelly since Hell House and his escape. Now, with his disguise off, he looked really good.

Sandy was still laughing. “Oh, Gene, you’re still as handsome as I remembered.” Eugene was beaming.

“Say, Sandy, when we get to New America, do you suppose I can call you up sometime?” Sandy just laughed.

“You better.”



Three days had passed since Chad Armstrong had ordered the lawyer to get the requested maps to him. He called more than a dozen times only to be

given the runaround. He turned to his two mates, looking frustrated. "He's in a meeting; he's out of the office; he's with a client. It's always something. He never returns my phone calls." Armstrong was steaming. "Let's go down to Phillips's office. We're going to have a little talk with that scoundrel."

When they entered the outer office, the secretary greeted them. "May I help you?"

"You remember me, Chad Armstrong."

"Oh, yes, sir. I'm sorry, but Mr. Phillips isn't in. He'll be in court all day."

Armstrong scowled. Wrenn had a diabolical smile on his face, and Foote went over to the lawyer's door and pounded on it. "Phillips! Open up."

The secretary scolded him. "I told you, he's not in his office. You can come back tomorrow."

Armstrong leaned across the desk, toward the frightened secretary. "Get that bastard on the phone, and tell him to get over here right away."

Joanne, the secretary, wasn't sure what to do. She was beginning to believe she wasn't dealing with just any old client. Just then, Phillips opened his door. "May I help you?" He just stood there in a starched white dress shirt, red tie and an expensive looking vest. On his left wrist was a Rolex watch. His silver hair was perfectly groomed. His head was slightly tilted in a haughty manner. Wrenn and Foote rushed in.

"You can't just barge into my office."

Armstrong stayed outside to keep an eye on the secretary. "Looks like your boss snuck back in without you knowing about it."

The secretary didn't say anything. Joanne was used to a lot of angry customers coming in and refusing to leave; even barging into Nate's office. It happened. She knew her boss was crooked, but he paid her well. What she wasn't used to, however, was the sound of her boss squealing several times. It frightened her.

"Let's go in and find out what's going on," Armstrong said. Joanne started to protest, but Chad was insistent. They walked in and Joanne was stunned at seeing the desk moved out of the way and his boss up against the wall, staring at a dagger at his throat.

"I think he got the message, Jack," Chad said to Wrenn. Wrenn let Phillips go and put the knife away. "Are you ready to do some business,

Nate, old boy?" Chad said.

"There is no more business with you guys. I showed you the way to freedom, led you right up to the fence. Now I don't know anything about who tipped off those two guys, but they didn't stop you anyway. All you had to do is climb over the fence. No barbed wire to stop you. The fence was an easy climb. If you didn't take it, then it was by your own choice. Don't blame me. I kept my end of the bargain."

"I take it you don't have any maps for us," Chad said.

"Our business is over. If you don't leave, I'll call the police. I understand that frightens you, doesn't it?"

"Well, I don't suppose frighten is the word for it. Now, talking about police is no way to conduct some unfinished business. You have a hundred grand from us, and as far as I can tell, you haven't earned any of it." Phillips was still defiant.

"Sit over there, Nate." Armstrong indicated a chair over against the wall and away from his desk. He motioned to Joanne to join him.

"I'm fine right here," he said.

"Terry, help him find his seat." Addressing Nate, "I didn't ask you to take a seat, I told you to sit there. Now, tell me, Nate, how did you spend our money?"

"I have people to pay off: police, community leaders, citizen patrols, etc. Then there's my own expense. I get paid five hundred an hour."

"How do you explain those two yokels who met us at the end of the woods?"

"Somebody must have paid them more."

"So you take no responsibility?"

"What does it matter? You overpowered them."

"It doesn't explain what happened. Nevertheless, those guys provided some useful information for us."

"Care to tell us about it, Nate?" Wrenn said.

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"Terry, search his files for anything we need. Jack, keep an eye on Nate. Keep after him to tell the truth. Me and Joanne here are going to go out to the outer office and have a talk."

Joanne was crying. They walked back to the outer office, closing the door behind them. "Please don't kill me. I have a husband and a six year old son at home."

Just then a customer entered the office. Armstrong turned toward him. "Office is closed. Get out!" The man hurried out.

"Can you lock that door?" Chad suggested putting a sign on the door. She did so.

"Good. Now we can have some privacy."

"Please, don't hurt me."

"Is your boss even a real lawyer?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Tell me about his clients."

"Mostly people like you. They're looking to escape the country. There desperate. Nate preys on them."

"That so? How many clients does he have?"

"I don't know—a lot."

"Dozens?"

"Yes."

"A hundred?"

"More."

"Two hundred?"

"He might, but I don't think there's that many."

"Shall we say one fifty."

"About that."

"Do any of them make it to the other side?"

"No."

"None?"

She just shook her head. "That fence is not really a border fence. Nate and about a dozen other men just put it up."

"Well, well, well," Armstrong said, wearing a sly grin. "Not even a real border fence. How far is the real border?"

"About five miles."

Armstrong was surprised. "Then how do people die of exposure? One of those yokels who tried to get the drop on us said a few people escape, but it was about twenty-five miles to civilization, if you knew enough to go the right way. Now you tell me it's only five miles away."

"He probably believed it. They think that fence is the real border. Only a couple dozen people or so know the truth."

"What about the people who were supposed to have died from lack of food and water?"

Joanne hesitated. "They were shot."

"Who double-crossed us at that pretend border fence?"

She hesitated again. "It was Nate."

"So Nate took a hundred grand from us to cross a fence that had nothing to do with the border, then he betrays us, and what...shared the bounty with the civilian patrol?"

"Yes, though he pockets most of the money."

"Thank you, Joanne. Let's go inside and see what my partners found."

"Chad," said Foote, "you should see the shit old Nate's got here. Everything we need. Maps, citizen patrols, where everyone lives, who's involved; even where the watch patrols are, and when the shifts change."

Chad turned to Wrenn. "So, what has Nate to say for himself?"

"I can speak for myself."

"Then speak."

"It isn't just me. You kill me and it won't change anything. I'm easily replaced, and wherever you go you'll run into civilian patrols."

"You're their leader?"

"One of them. People with money and resources organize other civilian patrols up and down the border."

"You mean the real border or just that fence?"

Nate just glanced over to Joanne.

"I told him. He said he'd kill me if I didn't."

Nate was very unhappy about that. Chad delivered a right hook to the schnoz. Phillips' nose began bleeding and he just sat there holding it. Armstrong told Foote to grab the documents he found.

"That's theft," Phillips said.

Armstrong just spun around toward the lawyer. "That's real sick, coming from you. After all, when it comes to theft, you're a real pro. Now, if either of you are thinking of going to the police, I'll send one of my men here to burn your office to the ground, with both of you in it."

CHAPTER 26:

PLAN INTERRUPTED

Eugene and Sandy went to a restaurant across from the motel for some lunch while Hayfield ordered takeout from another restaurant and ate his lunch at poolside. No one was standing guard anymore.

Armstrong learned of a conference room not in use, and so that afternoon Armstrong, his two buddies, Pamela Piper, the O'Reilly's, and Senator Moore went over Moore's maps, and the maps and reports that he took from Phillips. They spent the first two hours going over everything to see what they had. Then they began throwing out ideas and options. "With this information," Ray said, "getting across should be easy. All that's left is picking the easiest way." When Sandy and Eugene got back, they decided to see what their leadership had come up with. Eugene knocked on the door and Wrenn answered it. "Gene, my man, and Sandy." "Come on in, folks," Chad said. "What...you didn't bring your buddy Haystacks with you?" mocked Terry Foote. Wrenn let out a laugh, and the others joined in. Pamela was on the phone with her brother, Henry, Mayor of Piper City, formerly Baker City, Oregon. "Okay, but Chad Armstrong wants to speak with you. Hold on." Pamela gave the phone to Armstrong. "Okay, Henry, what's your recommendation?" Everyone waited. There was a long pause while Chad heard Henry's arguments, but Chad started shaking his head and the group was ready to hear some bad news. "No, Henry, I don't think that's a good idea. It may be secluded, but the thought of children being present isn't good. Look, I've been studying the maps and I think the best way in is on Highland Avenue." There was another pause, and then, "Hold on, Henry. Let me relay that to the group. Hey, Pamela, does this have a speaker phone?" "I think it does, but I'm not sure how to use it." The phone was military and used by anyone connected to the government when they needed advanced encryptions. "It does," Ev Moore said. "Let me show you." "Okay, Henry, can you hear me?" "Loud and clear." "Good. You're on speakerphone. The whole group is listening in. Now, tell me again what

you just said.” “I said I don’t think Highland is a good idea. It’s too open.” “Well, Henry, that’s why you’re in administration and I’m in the military. Where you see open spaces, I see hills. Ever read about Waterloo?” “No. Is that where Napoleon was captured?” “You know how?” Chad said, smiling. “No.” “Hills, my man. Even Napoleon didn’t see them. They’re subtle. The British lied down and the French couldn’t see them. Same thing. Plus, we’ll be there late at night. No traffic on the cross street, two guards my sharpies can see, but won’t be seen. They’ll be taken out, the lock on the gate broken, and we’ll go right through. Then about seven miles to the border. Can you meet us there? We may need your help getting through.” “I hate bloodshed. Can’t you bribe them to let you through?” “No. In the first place we’ve tried that before and it was a disaster. They just double-crossed us. In the second place, we’re all broke. I’m not sure what’s going on. I mean no one knows for sure why there is so much incentive to stop us, even after taking bribes. Senator Moore thinks the government may be bribing them to stop people from crossing as well, but he isn’t sure. It may be NOGOV.” “Okay, we’ll do it your way, Chad. What time can we expect you?” “12:15 A.M.” “We’ll have a couple militiamen at the border.”



“Everybody get that?” Dennis O’Reilly said. “All right then, let’s get that squad to the motel. I’ll go and see the Commandant now.”

“O’Reilly, what do you have for me?”

“Sir, I’ve found them.”

“Sit down, Dennis, and tell me everything.”

“Well, sir, it was your man, Nate Phillips, who gave us the break we were looking for. We know just where they are. We heard all their plans.”

“Great, Dennis. Now start from the beginning.”

“Well, it started with Horace Hayfield. He was caught trying to sneak across near the popular Oregon crossing. He was arrested and released by Phillips, who smelled real money. He knew Horace had a bunch, so he put on his act as the caring lawyer, sprung him, and then offered him a real—well, I should put real in quotes—chance to get out of the country, but it turned out Horace couldn’t get his money out.”

“I had DOJ freeze his accounts.”

“Right. Well, that wasn’t the end of it because he arranged to have Senator Moore released from the hospital and brought to Idaho to cross the border. But it turned out he had better contacts than he had money.”

“Wait! So Moore was never killed?”

“No. It was Phillips who put the word out that he was dead. The wounds were only superficial. He more or less fainted on the tarmac.”

Both laughed. “Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Casimir said.

“Phillips spread the word he was dead, because he smelled money—a lot of it. Anyway, he now had Moore, but it turned out Moore didn’t have a lot of money. Phillips gave his spiel about how he could get him out of the country, and that’s when he learned Pamela was nearby. Phillips was convinced that she and her charges had plenty of money. There was just one problem: she had ex-blues with her. Not just Ray and Cassandra, like we figured, but Armstrong, Foote, and Wrenn.”

“I was wondering why we hadn’t heard from them for months. Okay, so what happened next?”

“Phillips had Moore contact Pamela from his encrypted phone. The plan was for them to come to the Lazy Tourist motel in Martinville, Idaho. Phillips would meet them, collect a hundred grand, give them a phony escape plan, and then have them arrested.”

“So we knew where they were—at this Lazy something motel. Why didn’t we send someone there ourselves and pick them up?”

“Well, sir, this area wasn’t under our control. It was neutral territory and we’d pretty much need local cooperation, or have the local authorities pick them up. Phillips said he could save us the bribe money it would take to do this, and he’d pick them up for us after fleecing them. I gave him the okay and told him to keep us posted as to what was going on.”

“That’s taking a chance, Dennis. What if he betrayed us and let them through?”

“First, sir, without his cooperation we’d have a hard time picking them up. Phillips said he had some of his men keep an eye on the motel just in case we sent some of our men there. In the second place, we let him fleece them first in return for his cooperation. And in the third place—”

“In the third place I’d string him up by his nuts.”

“Yes sir. Then the plan went awry. The Blues figured out the scam. They threatened Phillips. Armstrong, Foote, and Wrenn came storming in and threatened him and his secretary if they weren’t given maps and the

truth about the border crossing. They left with quite a few documents: maps, civil patrols, and everything they needed to develop their own plans. Phillips told me everything after they left, including how Joanne, the secretary, told him about the false border fence.”

“Then what happened? Did you send people over to the motel to pick them up?”

“I’m coming to that sir. When we had Moore, one of our engineers, working with a programmer, modified his phone. We worked out an alert system. Whenever a transmission begins, we’re alerted; and when we turn on the decryption machine, the call is decrypted, and we can listen in on the conversation, just as if the call was made to us. The only thing we can’t do is transmit. It is just a listening device.”

“You haven’t answered my question yet.”

“We were discussing how to approach the situation when the alert system sounded, sir. Pamela Piper called her brother in Sick America, using Moore’s phone. My team listened in on the conversation. They revealed their plans to Henry. Now, we can do two things. We can plan our raid better, knowing where they’d all be, and we can step up security on their escape route, just in case they get away again. Either way, we’ll have them tonight.”

“Keep me posted.”



The Pilgrims, as they began calling themselves, mostly went to their rooms. Chad stayed up, and after a while, decided to look in on each. He began with his own men, who continued to room together. Both were exercising and joking with each other. Wrenn was reciting a little ditty.

“The men were put on high alert
When Molly Brown hiked up her skirt.
With a wiggle of her hip and a laugh so hearty,
The men gathered close to her, ready to party.
When she bent over to show us her art
She wiggled her fanny and let out a fart.”

Chad knocked on the O'Reillys' door and Ray answered. Cassandra was lying in bed, watching TV. "Hi, Cass."

"Hi, Chad."

Ray just gave him a big bear hug and told him to come in. "How's it going, Ray?"

"All ready and rarin' to go. How's everybody else doing?"

"Well, I thought I'd start with your room. You've really done a fine job here, as you always did with the Blues."

Cassandra got up now and came over to give Chad a hug. "Thanks for all your help, Chad. You came when we really needed you. I don't think we'd have made it this far without you, Terry, and Jack. You guys are real pros."

Chad smiled. "Now, we'll see you at eleven. Goodnight guys."

Armstrong then went to Pamela's room.

"Come on in, Chad. I've just written my will. The manager's a notary so I can make it official. I'm mailing it to my lawyer back in Detroit. If I don't make it, he'll execute it. I told him that if I make it I'll find a way to communicate that to him."

"We'll make it. Just a few more hours and we'll be gone from here, and all the troubles will be behind us."

She gave him a hug. "Thank you for all your help, Chad."

"See you in a few hours."

Armstrong then went to Hayfield's room. "Just checking in with you, Horace. You doing okay?"

"Sure, Mr. Armstrong. Come in. There's somethin' I want to tell y'all."

Armstrong hesitated, but came in.

"I'm sorry I didn't contribute to that fund the lawyer was collecting. The truth is I'm broke. I spent most of the money I had trying to get out of here, but I ran into the same scams you did. My account's been frozen, I'm down to my last few hundred dollars, and I got a car I can't seem to sell without attracting the wrong kind of people."

Chad just listened.

"I know I won't win any popularity contests around here. For what it's worth, I wish I made better decisions. Please tell Gene I'm sorry. He has a right to be angry. He knows what that brain probe can do. I just wanted to help...." His voice trailed off.

“We’ll be on the other side in just a few hours. Things will look better then.”

“Thanks for your help, Mr. Armstrong. Once again, I’m sorry for creating so many problems for everyone.” He then tried to smile. “Like the anonymous quote, ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time.’”

Chad smiled and wished him a good night. Then he went to Sandy’s room.

Sandy greeted him warmly and invited him in. “I’ve just been writing a letter to Jay.”

“Oh?”

“We’ll be in the new country long before he ever gets it. I have no intention of ever going back to him, knowing now how he ruined my marriage to Fernando.”

“Is that why you use Menendez as your last name?”

“Yes. I still feel I really belong to him, even if he’s dead. Jay was good to me, and I never questioned my marriage to him until I started having crazy dreams. Now I know I was actually coerced into marrying him, if that makes any sense.”

“Absolutely, it does. And you’re welcome to write that letter. I’ll let you get some rest now. Be back at eleven.”

“Goodnight, Chad.”

Next, Chad stopped at Eugene’s room.

“Hi, Chad. Come on in. I just finished talking to Bo, my older brother.”

“I guess he must miss you.”

“Yeah, he does. He told me the FBI came to question him, and mom and dad. Now, they feel like fugitives. They want to know where I am. What the hell do I have to do with the FBI? I know why the Squad is chasing me, but the FBI?”

“It’s a strange world we live in.”

“It’s a dead world I live in. I lost my wife, was thrown in jail for something I didn’t do, almost had my brain fried, and now the Squad wants me dead. I know it. I feel it right down to the bone. Now, here I am—no job, no freedom, and maybe about to be killed. All I ever wanted was a normal life: wife, couple of kids, good job. I had that, except for the kids, and now it’s all gone, and I can’t quite comprehend just why. Oh, intellectually, I understand, but emotionally, no. I was never very political, despite being a friend of Professor Zinney. Apparently, some people think I

plan to work with him, to overthrow the country, should I get over to the other side. Well, after jail, Hell House, and Hogs, I'd do it, if I knew how."

Chad just laughed. "Yeah, I know what you mean. These people who own the government get pretty paranoid."

"What are we going to do when we get over there? Only Pamela has any money. Maybe Haystacks and that senator."

"None claim to have much money, except Pamela. I wouldn't worry about it though. Before they started barricading the place, people came and went all the time. I had a buddy who went there just to check it out. He said that even if you showed up penniless they'd take care of you. Besides, Pamela's loaded. She said she'd reimburse us when we get over there. Well, let me check up on Ev. Get some rest."

He then knocked on the senator's door. "Well, Ev, it looks like you'll finally make it over there, after all."

"You know, Chad, I had a decent career over here until I got caught. Now it's cut and run, or go back to Hell House. Maybe if I'm lucky they'll just put a bullet in my head." He paused with his head downcast. "I don't even know if my wife thinks I'm alive or dead. She's over there waiting for me. I wish I could phone her. I tried, but the call won't go through."

"Hang in there, and never give up hope. One thing I know is that everything changes. Watch for it and watch for your opportunity. Now, get some rest."

As Chad Armstrong began to leave there was a commotion. Someone was yelling, but he couldn't understand what was being said. Then he heard someone else yell, and then someone else yelling back. The one thing he was sure of was that the shouting was getting closer. Moore came back out to find out what was going on, but Armstrong pushed him back inside, and then followed him in.

The commotion became louder and more intimate. Now he could hear a clear voice. It was loud and commanding. He knew at once it was some sort of authority. He had to think quickly. He'd started to reach for his phone when the door opened. Standing before him was the manager and a Squad leader.

"Mr. Armstrong, I presume," the Squad leader said. "And Senator Moore. How good to meet you both. I've heard so much about you, especially you, Chad." Armstrong was unarmed; the squad leader was.

“Oh, I guess you want me to introduce myself. I’m McElroy, Brigade Commander of the Local Battalion. You can call me Mac. No need to concern yourself with the specifics. I’m not here legally anyway.” Then he laughed. “Well, legal or not, I got the gun. Come on out, you two, and join the party.”

Armstrong and Moore were led alongside the parking lot in front of this wing of the inn. “Everybody here?” he yelled to his two men. One brandished a rifle and laughing, and the other a handgun. They counted heads and carried pictures.

Christ, thought Armstrong, they seem to know everything about us. It must be that weasel lawyer. Damn, how did I underestimate him?

Mac then addressed the group. “Listen up! Each one of you is going to be taken back to Squad territory. You’re wanted for multiple felony counts including murder. We’re going to process you out of here, two at a time.”

As Mac was making his speech, Armstrong assessed the situation. Only three of them? They do know who we are. That’s obvious. If it were me, I’d have at least three men on the roof with rifles trained on us. But there’s no one but them. Foote saw me and shook his head as if to confirm there were no snipers. Mac seems to be a legitimate leader but the young lad with the rifle is scared. Oh, sure, I saw him laughing at the sight of us—scared, angry, and confused—but he’s scared too. Look at that right leg shake. He keeps moving around so no one will notice, but that’s nothing that’d be lost on my sharpies, as well as Ray and Cass. He’s the weakling of the squadron.

Mac called for Eugene and Pamela. The guy with the handgun got careless as he put the gun in his belt and whipped out plastic cuffs.

Christ, I wished I still had my Berretta on me, thought Armstrong.

Eugene started walking toward Mac. *Christ, he has steely confidence.*

Just then, with unexpected suddenness, Eugene Sulke whipped a Berretta from behind and fired at Mac’s midsection, and before the other guy could get his gun out of his belt, Eugene shot him as well. Junior froze, not knowing what to do. It gave Eugene a chance to run. He ran around the corner of the motel. Junior got off a shot, but missed. *Jesus Christ, thought Chad. Has Eugene been hanging around us too much? He figured out everything. It was beautiful. He must have heard the commotion, and put the gun behind him. He assessed the situation better than me. He knew he*

was only about twenty feet from the corner of the motel. Enough time to get away. But there's work to do. The second guy was only winged.

Mac was on his knees with gun in hand. He tried to turn around and return fire, but twisting around was impossible. Pain shot through his whole body. His heart began racing, his skin turned pale, and his face became contorted with the pain. He began sweating profusely. "Get that fucker." Mac's voice was stressed and gravelly. The wounded man chased after Eugene. That left Junior and a badly wounded Mac to cover the group—five of them Blues.

Come on, Mac. Hurry up and die, will ya? With Mac gone, Junior will panic. One of the Blues will get him. Look at Junior. He doesn't know what to do. He's about to shit his pants, but that makes him dangerous too. Inexperienced people will start shooting at anybody when they get scared enough.

Mac just glared at everyone. He tried to look commanding, if for no other reason than to reassure the kid. He knew he needed him to calm down. He called out to him. "Keep that rifle trained on 'em, Bernie. If anyone so much as moves, shoot 'em." But Mac couldn't fool any Blue. The kid's eyes were shooting out of his head.

Then Armstrong felt someone poke his back. He noticed Ray and Cassandra were out of his sight. *They probably have a plan. Look at Wrenn over there, with the smirk on his face. He knows what's going on. Ray and Cass will need cover. Will he provide it?*

Junior kept waving the rifle around. Mac just stared forward, breathing ever more rapidly. Ray kicked him in the back. Mac moaned something.

"All right, I'm coming," yelled Wrenn.

Junior fell for the ruse.

Wrenn came up to Mac, who looked surprised at seeing him. Wrenn just stood there, looking scared. Junior's vision of his boss was blocked. Cass reached over his left shoulder with two hands locked together by thumbs. With palms down, she came down hard on the gun, pushing it down to the ground. She made sure the barrel didn't point up. At the same time, Ray put a shoelace around Mac's neck, jerking it up and back with quick ferocity. Mac let out a slight groan and a whimper. Junior never picked up on it.

Cassandra wrenched the gun out of the dying Mac's hand. Mac fought well, but quickly gave up the struggle and slumped back. Cassandra quickly aimed the gun at Junior and fired. Whether Junior woke up to the danger

just in time or fired in reaction to being hit is uncertain, but he fired the rifle, and Pamela collapsed to the ground. Cassandra fired a second time and Junior was down.

Armstrong jumped into action. “Ray, Cass—get your weapons and go after the wounded guy. Go in the same direction Gene went. Wrenn, Foote—do the same, but go toward the office.” They moved quickly. “The rest of you—wait. Who’s missing?”

“Hayfield,” Moore said. “He followed Gene and the wounded man.”

“Christ, what the hell is he thinking? Never mind. The rest of you go with Moore. I want all of you together in his room.” Then he gave Moore the piece that Cassandra got from Mac. “Know how to use this?” Moore just stared at it. “The safety is off. All you have to do is aim and pull the trigger. Do not touch the trigger when you aren’t prepared to shoot. Keep your finger on the trigger guard, like this.” Armstrong showed him how to handle the gun. Moore indicated he understood and went with the rest to the room.

Sandy stood over Pamela’s body, crying hysterically. “Sandy,” Chad said. “She’s dead.”

Sandy just stared up at Chad. “We can’t just leave her here like this. Please, Chad, help me get her in my car. I don’t want her to die right here in this place; like this. She’ll be pronounced dead in New America. She can be with her brothers as she always wanted.”

Chad obliged, and then got Sandy in Moore’s room. Then he headed toward his own room to get his piece.



Eugene Sulke ran around the corner looking for a place to hide. The wounded man got the drop on him. Eugene froze. “That’s it, punk. Set your handgun down on the ground and come over here.”

Just then Horace Hayfield leaped on the wounded man’s back and grabbed his gun hand. Eugene picked his weapon back up, but couldn’t fire for fear of hitting Hayfield. He ran over and tried to wrestle the gun away from the man when the gun went off. Hayfield slumped to the floor and the wounded man now pushed Eugene back and took dead aim. Then another

shot rang out. The stunned man whirled around only to be shot again. It was Ray.

CHAPTER 27:

ATTACKED

Armstrong got the group assembled again. The next stop would be New America. Armstrong would lead the way. He would be followed by his two sharpshooters, Wrenn and Foote; and then came Sandy, with Pamela's body in the back seat. Eugene would follow her, driving Pamela's car. Moore was followed by Ray and Cassandra.

It was two hours earlier than planned, but still well after dark. They drove for the Highland barricade. There, they would shoot the guards, break the fence they assumed was padlocked, and drive to freedom. When they got there, however, they found the fence heavily fortified. Armstrong just made a right-hand turn at the fence, so as not to raise suspicions, and headed back toward the Lazy Tourist. The group pulled over to assess their situation.

"Christ, it's like they know everything about our plan," Ray said.

"Could, dare I say, one of us be a spy?" Cassandra asked.

Armstrong mulled that one over. "The only possibilities I see would be Hayfield and Moore. Hayfield just gave his life for Eugene, and Moore nearly had his brain torched. No, I don't think any of us are spies. I'm certain that rat lawyer, Phillips, told them about us."

"Still," Cassandra said, "how did they know about tonight?"

"It could be a coincidence," Chad said. "Phillips knew that we know every checkpoint in front of every border. Local authorities might have decided to increase security at every checkpoint. There's probably a bounty on our heads, and no doubt Phillips wants to claim it for himself. He probably bribed the civil patrols with part of the bounty."

"If what you say is true," Eugene said, "then how will we ever get across?"

"One thing at a time, Gene," Armstrong said. "Let's go to the kid crossing one." Henry Piper told them of the crossing where the parents

brought their children with them when on patrol. "If heavily fortified, we'll pull over someplace and reassess the situation." Everyone agreed.

The group resumed their trip only to find the same situation. There were several additional men, and no children.

"No question," Ray said. "They know our plans and they're going to block all the access points."

Sandy suggested trying another time, but Chad, and the others agreed that they were out of time. They would get across the border tonight or die trying. Armstrong and the other Blues got together to hammer out a final plan.

"I believe we'll have to get around the border fence," Ray said. "We can use the woods to hide in. Sneak around, take out the guards, open the fence, and then drive through."

"Sounds like the plan," Armstrong said. "Ray and Cassandra, you take the right woods. Me, Foote and Wrenn will take the left. Turn your phones to airplane mode. We'll coordinate our assault by time; half hour should be enough." They told the others of their plan and decided for an assault for exactly 11:30.

All agreed on the plan, except Terry Foote. "You know, I'm a little uncomfortable about dividing up and then not being able to communicate with each other."

"The woods may be full of enemy folk," Armstrong said.

"All the more reason why it's a bad idea," Foote said. "What if one side needs help? What if they get the drop on one of us? Nobody else will know."

"Foote's got a point," Ray said.

"But two groups have a better chance at succeeding instead of one," Armstrong said.

"But which groups do the civilians join?" Ray said.

Armstrong paused to think, and then began shaking his head in agreement. "You're right. We'll have to stay together. I'll take the lead. Ray and Cassandra, you lag behind. Wrenn and Foote: you take the flanks. Everyone else in the middle."

"We should have a scout," Cassandra said. "I'll volunteer."

"I don't like that idea," Ray said.

"In most cases that would be a good idea, but not now. We should stay in close quarters," Armstrong said.

Everyone agreed, and the group started out, out of sight of the guards. The plan was to circle around to the back of the guards, and catch them napping. Wrenn took the north point and was the first to spot an enemy patrol. He was spotted and darted behind a tree, but the trunk was too small to offer much protection. He took his AR70 out, but then stopped. *What if there are a lot more in there?*

Armstrong spotted him and knew something was wrong, and then he spotted two shadows about twenty yards ahead moving quickly through the trees. The realization that the woods were full of enemies couldn't be denied. Furthermore, they were probably spotted. He motioned for Wrenn to come to him, and to tighten up the ranks.

Suddenly, a shot rang out, and Wrenn instantly hit the ground. His heart was beating fast now. The bullet was so close he felt it graze the side of his cap, and he didn't know who drew a bead on him; only that it came from a different direction than from the first guy he spotted.

Armstrong saw that Wrenn was all right, and drew everyone else close to him. "Eugene and Senator Moore, you still have your guns?"

"Yeah," they both said. "Shoot only if you are close to the enemy. Each time you fire, move quickly. Don't stay in the same position. Understand?"

They nodded affirmatively.

"We won't be able to drive through now," Armstrong said. "It's run for the border through the woods."

"Ray, Cassandra, lead our troops. Foote, guard their south flank. I'm going to help Wrenn out."

"Shouldn't we stay here?" Eugene said.

"No," Armstrong said. "The enemy may thin out the farther west you go. We've got to get to the border. We'll catch up with you. Stay low to the ground and hug the trees."

Armstrong made his way toward Wrenn, crouching, but moving as fast as he could. Suddenly, a shot rang out from somewhere west of him and struck the leaves just behind his trailing foot. He quickly got up and scampered behind a tree as two more shots rang out. Wrenn fired back, but appeared to miss. After a minute or two, Armstrong made his way over to his buddy, and hid behind him and the tree.

"I think there are two of them where they fired on you, and a third to the north of west—over there," Wrenn said, pointing toward a clump of trees.

“It’s a good thing they don’t have floodlights attached to their scopes or we’d be dead.”

“I’ll run back over to where I was and draw their fire. Try to get a target and take them out. I’ll look for the third guy.”

Armstrong dashed for the other tree, but didn’t draw any fire. Then he yelled out. “Hey you, two. Drop your guns and come out. If you don’t you’ll be dead in the next minute. We know where you’re—”

Before Armstrong could get another word out shots from both guys rang out and Wrenn returned fire. He heard a groan and then the other guy shot at Wrenn. Armstrong returned fire, missed, and then drew fire again. Wrenn returned fire and didn’t miss. Both snipers were presumed dead. Armstrong then fired toward the third guy, but heard him run away. Wrenn then walked over to Armstrong.

“I sent the others west,” Armstrong said. “Ray and Cassandra are leading the way. Let’s catch up to them.”



“Christ.” Dennis just hung up the phone. His secretary just looked at him. She was getting used to this.

Dennis got up and made the long walk to the boss’ office. “Come,” Casimir said. Dennis walked in, saluted, and reported that he had some bad news.

“Jesus Christ, O’Reilly. You had every advantage. How in the hell did they get away this time? Were there any survivors?” He thought he was just mocking the past failures, and was genuinely surprised at Dennis’s answer.

“They were all killed, sir.”

“How many?”

“Three, sir.”

“Three? Goddamnit, O’Reilly. Jesus Christ! Three? Tell me you at least brought in the A-Team; the best of the best.”

“The squad leader was McElroy, a local brigade commander. The second was an experienced man, while the third was new, but he was eager.”

Jaydan just stared incredulously at his assistant. “Why, O’Reilly? Why settle on three morons?”

Dennis always could gauge how much trouble he was in by whether the boss called him by his first or last name. “They were the best I could get, sir.”

“Did you tell them about the million dollar bounty they get to share in?”

“They weren’t very interested, sir. They said they’d need ten times as much money, and that might not be enough. One guy—an ex-Blue—told me no amount would be enough. ‘You can’t spend the money when you’re dead’. That’s the prevailing attitude.”

Casimir was pacing the office now. “Did they get anyone?”

“Pamela Piper went down and so did Horace Hayfield.”

“I’m glad they at least got that bitch, Piper. No more illegal escorts out of the country. Now, give me the details of everything that happened.”

“I don’t really have any details, since there were no survivors who were going to report in.”

“Where are they now?”

“We don’t know. Their plan was to take the Highland checkpoint, but they could have gone to half a dozen other checkpoints. We have several hundred volunteers all along the border with Oregon. There’s no way they won’t be seen.”

Casimir looked like he was at his wit’s end. “No fuckups this time. Understand?”

“Yes, sir, no fuckups.”

“Shoot them, except for Sandy. I don’t want her dead. I want her brought back to me.”

Dennis started to leave, but Casimir told him to wait. He was pacing behind his desk. Then he stopped and turned toward O’Reilly. “After they’re located, I want you to fly out there. I’ll make the arrangements. We’ll helicopter you out to the naval base, get you in a Fighter, and then helicoptered to their location. You can be there in two hours.”

“Yes, sir.” Dennis saluted and left.



It was now midnight as the Pilgrims traipsed through the woods. There was a full moon, which helped them see better, but it also made them more visible to the enemy. It was finally decided that Foote and Wrenn would

take the forward positions and use rifles. Ray and Cassandra would lie back, also armed with AR's. Everyone else used pistols.

They weaved their way through the woods for over an hour and figured they cleared about three miles. Suddenly there was gunfire ahead, and to their right. Then, more gunfire. They figured that Foote and the enemy were trading rounds. Foote heard a shell ricochet off a tree trunk just to his left. He knew he was spotted, but where was the shooter? He yelled to his would be assailant. "Get out of here, or you will be killed."

Then came a distant voice. "Surrender now or I will kill you." Foote smiled. A real pro wouldn't give his position away.

Foote inched closer to where the enemy was, but then shots rang out from his right, just as Armstrong arrived to help his friend out. Armstrong returned fire, but more shots rang out from several different directions.

Meanwhile, Ray and Cassandra were pushing the civilians forward. A minute later Armstrong came back. "Keep moving forward, quickly. Ray, Cassandra," whispered Armstrong, "close the ranks. Move fast. The woods are full of Squads and civil patrol volunteers. Mostly patrols. They're heavily armed. They came at us from the north. I think they're trying to force us back to the road. We're going to have to move forward and southward."

They heard a noise overhead. Armstrong looked up and saw a chopper with a spotlight. The Lightning Squad clearly knew they were out here and meant to find them. Eugene and Sandy were scared.

"They're going to find us," Eugene said.

Armstrong looked at the Blues, who were signing. Wrenn said, "What an opportunity."

Armstrong spotted a small open area with a single tree. He looked at Wrenn with his sly smile. Wrenn made his way for the tree and then reaching into his backpack.

Eugene appeared confused. "What is he doing?" he asked Ray.

"Using the spotlight to see better. Hopefully it'll illuminate the enemy before us."

Eugene still couldn't understand how he got up to the roof at that motel or how he was going to climb that tree. If it was deciduous, he could understand. But a conifer? That's got to be a lot tougher.

Then he saw Wrenn pull something out and put them on his shoes, and began climbing.

Cassandra came over to him. “They’re called claws. You fit them over your shoes. They grab onto the trunk of the tree. He also grabbed a rope and put it around the trunk. They enable him to climb better and rapidly.” She smiled.

Wrenn was up there about twenty minutes before coming down. The others were huddled together behind a clump of trees. Wrenn came over and reported.

“There’s about a dozen of them; mostly volunteers. One group of three—probably a squadron—and they’re scattered all over. They appear to be moving south and west.”

“We’ve been outflanked,” said Armstrong. His sharpies appeared to concur. “We can’t continue west or we’ll run right into them. We’re going to have to run south and cross the road. They might not expect it.”

“I didn’t see anyone to our south, and the helicopter was searching only in the north woods,” Wrenn said.

“All right, you guys. Let’s run quietly to the road and cross into the south woods. Everyone ready?” They all nodded. “Okay, let’s go.”

Everyone was moving quickly now, and then Moore fell, letting out a yell. Eugene and Sandy came back for him. Everyone was occasionally falling, as it was dark and difficult to see where they were going. People were constantly running into low-lying branches, tripping over exposed roots, or getting scratched up on low-lying branches; but Moore’s injury was severe.

“I stepped in a hole and turned my ankle.” When he attempted to get up he found he was incapacitated. Eugene and Sandy attempted to pull him up, but Moore could put no weight on the right foot. They tried to carry him, but Moore screamed in pain when they tried.

They heard Ray. “Keep moving, don’t stop.”

Moore said, “Do as he says. Leave me. I can’t move.”

Then Sandy urged Eugene to keep running as Eugene set him down. “Listen, Ev,” Eugene said, “use your gun. Get as many of those bastards as you can.”

“Count on it,” Senator Moore said.

The gunfire got closer. Armstrong estimated they were about three miles from the border. They tried to move forward, but were being pushed toward the road, where they would be exposed. No one knew if there might be more enemies approaching from there. Armstrong figured if he were

running enemy operations he'd radio all nearby forces to move in from the south. If that happened before they could reach the border, they were as good as dead.



"Where are they, Smitty?" Olin said.

"I can't see them. Could they be dead?" Smitty asked.

"I haven't run across any bodies. No, I don't think so. I think they're hiding. Quiet. Listen for any noise coming from the south. I'll call the captain."

"Captain, it's Olin."

"What's your situation?"

"The enemy hasn't returned fire in the last five minutes. We can't see them. We think they're hiding."

"These are ex-Blues. They'll do anything to throw us off guard. How many are you?"

"We have a dozen men in pursuit."

"Flare out and move south carefully. Listen for any sound. Keep your eyes and ears open. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We still have the chopper out there, but there isn't enough fuel to stay out much longer."



The Pilgrims reached the road, and saw no sign of anyone. They crossed the road, and put about a hundred yards between themselves and it. "Okay," Armstrong said. "Run west; full speed. No stopping; no matter how tired you are. Ready? Let's go."

The pilgrims still felt they were about three miles from the border. If they moved fast enough they could be there in less than an hour. What they would find when they got there was anyone's guess.

Eugene could feel his heart slamming against his chest. His panting was raspy. *Gotta keep going. Keep going. Keep going. Oh shit, I'm so tired. I don't hear any more shooting. Maybe they lost us. Gotta keep going anyway.* A branch slapped him in the face. *How can I hug the trees when they keep tripping me, raking me across the face? Well, better than exposing myself to the enemy, I guess.*

He glanced at Sandy. She was in pain. She wasn't used to running. Still, she ran on. *Please Lord; let her at least make it. She's innocent. She never started anything. She's a true victim here. Please God, let her make it.*

"Keep going, you guys," Ray said from behind. They were slowing down. Eugene couldn't sense it. He was going as fast as he could, but his body couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't a straight line they were running. They were dodging trees, bushes, and low tree limbs. They were stumbling, falling; and still they pushed on. They hadn't heard any gunshots for a while. Now they figured they'd gone another mile.

Another limb raked Eugene across the face. He could taste the pine needles in his mouth as he spit them out. He slapped the next branch away only for the ricochet to hit him in the head. Sandy occasionally let out a cry as she was repeatedly slapped by some conifer. Eugene could see her tiring red face panting for breath.

"Two miles to the border," everyone heard Chad say.

Then Sandy fell. "I can't go on," she uttered. Eugene was doubled over as well. Everyone stopped. The Blues waited and listened for the sound of the enemy. There was silence.



"Captain Mueller, it's Olin. I can't find them."

"Olin, where do you think they went? Come on, man, you're a nine year veteran, a brigade commander. What would you do if you were Armstrong?"

"I thought he and his crew would climb some trees and blend in. We kept looking up, but so far, nothing. We don't even hear a bird or an animal."

"Remember, Olin, he's got civilians with him. He can only move as fast as they can. They've got to be nearby. Fire a few rounds to the south. That's

where they're most likely to be. Try to draw fire from them."

"Yes, sir."

"How's your ammo holding out?"

"We brought plenty, Captain."

"Keep me posted."

Olin gave the command. They flared out some more and each man was to fire off a dozen rounds into the woods. Then, silence. No return fire.

"Again, men." They fired off another dozen rounds. No return fire.

Olin reported in again. "Nothing, sir. They didn't return fire."

"Keep moving south and west. We must stop them. You want to spend some of that million dollar bounty, don't you, Olin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then move it."



The Pilgrims could hear the gunfire from the north woods. Wrenn heard one of their rounds ricochet off a tree behind him, but he didn't believe he was spotted. *Just a stray bullet*, he thought. "Get moving, everyone," Armstrong said, trying to be quiet, yet forceful. The group was running as fast as they could now, and estimated they were about a mile and a half from the border. Gunfire was heard from behind them. It was what Armstrong feared the most. Enemy reinforcements were coming up from the east. They were still behind them, but exhausted as they were, they were too scared now to stop running.



"Olin," Mueller said. "Brigade Commander Kostroma just radioed me. He'd been driving up the road when he heard voices from the trees. He fired into them, but got no response. They're in pursuit now."

"So they crossed over into the south woods, Captain?"

"That's affirmative. Get all your men to the road. Run west to get ahead of them and cut them off."



The Pilgrims thought they got a break. There was a bit of a clearing ahead. They could see that the woods were thinning. They continued to run. Eugene and Sandy were down to a light jog now, and even the Blues were huffing it.

A mile to go. Got to keep going, thought Eugene. His mind kept wandering. He thought of Dennis again. *How can he do this to me? We were best friends. Why did he change? Could he have...?* He couldn't or wouldn't finish that thought. He wanted to remember his friend the way he was. *That time we played space people by the drainage ditch that became a shopping center a few years later, and then the anchor left. A few years later all the shops closed down. Then the town went under. Only a few stayed behind. They couldn't or didn't want to leave. Pamela was right. My world died and their ghosts are chasing me now.*

Eugene felt like he couldn't go on. His body rebelled to the point where he felt his legs had turned to lead. A wandering mind helped him deal with the pain from running and the fear of being killed. *I have to get to the other side now. I feel it in my bones. There is no life here anymore. It was the first time I could truly realize it. Old America is dead; gone. We went from a productive economy where everyone made money to an economy where only a few people could. Then to an economy that tried to preserve capital by cutting expenses—just a fancy way of saying they preserved profits by robbing people of their money. Then they started running government like a business. They did the same thing to their constituents. Preserve capital—cut expenses. Get rid of welfare, minimum wage, government regulations—promote freedom. Freedom for whom? They legalized drugs, gambling, and prostitution. Business demanded it. Freedom for business. But what freedom were they left with? A shrinking customer base. Squeeze more out of them? That was the freedom. Then if someone decides to steal your wife; if someone else attempts to recruit you into their cause.... Oh stop this, Gene. You'd be doing this one day no matter what.*

Eugene was thoroughly exhausted. He felt like he could barely move now. *Somehow we morphed into a totalitarian system and no one knows. No one knows because we still have a democratic structure—elections,*

president, legislature, courts, etc. but it isn't real anymore. This so-called lobbying outfit—NOGOV—runs the government—and they don't just stop there. They run everything: the schools, the media, the police, and the courts. They convince everyone that this is the best of all possible worlds. Wasn't that what Leibnitz said? Because God could control the world any outcome was always the best. Does NOGOV think it's God?

The pain was getting worse now. Still, he wanted his mind to wander. The brain probe. That was the final solution when the media, the schools, the law, the government wasn't enough to convince you of the new right and wrong, they'd just strap you to a chair and change your head. Christ. It's not so dissimilar to the Nazi final solution—no gas chambers, just the brain probe.



Kostroma radioed Olin. “I think I hear them. You’ve got to get ahead of them. They’re less than a mile from the border.”

“Okay, Kostroma, I’m glad you got here. They’re out of my sight. We’re at the road now, and we’re double-timing it westward. Get them to fire back, if you can, so we can get a fix on them.”

“We’re still out of range. They keep moving. You can move faster if you’re on the road. Get as close to the border fence as you can, and then move into the south woods.”

“Okay, we’ll try to move faster.”



As the Pilgrims reached the thinned out area, they noticed a hiking trail going west. Armstrong thought this was a terrific break since they were getting close to the border, and the trail would allow them to make better time. But then two things went wrong. First, the trail curved around south and the woods thickened again, and then they heard gunfire from behind them. Armstrong figured it was about two hundred yards.

“Blues,” Armstrong said, speaking to his sharpshooters, and Ray and Cassandra. “Stay behind Eugene and Sandy to protect them. Shoot only at what you can see, but keep running.”

“Maybe we should split up and hide behind trees,” Foote said. “Then we can pick them off.”

“Only if it’s our only option,” Armstrong said.

“He’s right,” Ray said to Terry. “We don’t know how many there are, and it would expose Gene and Sandy. I think we should head back north by northwest, toward the road. The pursuers might be shooting at phantoms that way.”

“Good idea, Ray,” Armstrong said.

The plan seemed to be working, since the continued gunfire seemed to be toward the left of them; then the next bad break came. They began hearing gunshots from the road and behind them. They couldn’t go back to the road. *It must be the original pursuers*, thought Armstrong. Then he whispered, “Stay off the road. Go west.”

Sandy went down. Eugene’s heart almost stopped, but she only tripped. She got up with his assistance, and they continued to run. Suddenly Sandy and Gene stopped as they saw the grass moving in front of them like a snake was racing through it. Wrenn caught up to them and said it was gunfire. “Keep moving,” he repeated. Everyone was panting now. It got so loud Chad was afraid their pursuers would pick up on them. Maybe they already had.



“Olin, it’s Kostroma. I heard them. They’re about a half klick from you, maybe less.”

“We’re running up behind them as fast as possible.”

“You shouldn’t have fired. They would have come out to the road. Now, my guess is they’ll stay where they are. We’ll try to outflank them and force them to the road.”



Eugene fell. Armstrong figured he'd tripped since there wasn't any more shooting, but it was exhaustion. This time Sandy was there to offer encouragement. Gene got up, but their pace was too slow. The Blues knew it, but no one was going to say anything. The journey was simply too long. Armstrong estimated they were only about a third of a mile from safety, but even a third of a mile was too far when you felt like your heart was about to leap out of your chest. Your body screamed at you to rest, but the adrenaline, produced by fear, said to go on. Sandy and Eugene did, but at a child's pace. Armstrong knew it was time to lay out a defense perimeter.

"Ray and Cassandra, stay with Sandy and Gene. The three of us are going to try and hold them off. Foote and Wrenn—set up a point perimeter, fifty yards. I'll take the middle."

Wrenn moved to the south, about fifty yards, and stood on the west side of a thick tree. Foote did the same thing about fifty yards to the north. Armstrong moved about fifty yards due west. They waited until the enemy fired to get a fix on their location or until they showed up. They figured they wouldn't have to wait long. Meanwhile, Ray and Cassandra flanked Gene and Sandy. They were moving slowly, which allowed Ray and Cassandra to fall back temporarily, and look for the enemy. They could easily catch up to them.

They heard another shot, and this time Cassandra cried out. Ray ran over to her, but she was dead. He estimated that the bullet went through her back and through the left ventricle. Ray cried as he stood over her. Eugene stopped first and went over to Ray. "Is she dead?" Ray just nodded.

Sandy ran up from behind. "Please, Ray, we have to go."

"I can't go. I can't leave her," he said sobbing.

Sandy wore a fearful expression, "They're catching up to us."

Ray looked up at them. "I estimate you're less than two hundred yards from the border. Run straight ahead for thirty seconds, then go right until you reach the road. Then straight for the border."

"Come with us, Ray," pleaded Eugene.

Ray tugged at Eugene. "Listen to me, Gene. Professor Zinney once told me that my tactics would never work, but I never listened. He was right. This country will collapse under its own greed. People will have to replace it with something. We have to bring the New World to the Old World. People have to know something better is out there. We're their hope now. I don't know if I'll make it, but you and Sandy must. Now GO!"

Ray knelt down and kissed Cassandra for the final time. “See you in heaven, my love.” Then he heard a noise and looked up at his brother. He stared at a Colt pointing right at him. Then Ray felt the pain of a .45 slug ripping through his intestines.

CHAPTER 28:

AN UNLIKELY HERO/AN UNLIKELY VILLAIN

“Kostroma, it’s Olin. I heard one of them yell. A woman, I think.”

“Good. We’re pinned down here by three of them. I think there’s only five left. Keep on the others.”

“Kostroma, one of my men said he got another one. I don’t know if he’s dead, but if he is, I believe it leaves only four left.” Then after a pause, “Make that five left. My best guy says he believes the one who yelled only faked it to throw us off. He’s now changed position and firing back. He got one of my men. We lost eight so far.”

“Where are you?” Kostroma said.

“About twenty-five yards behind you, but we were fired upon as well. I believe the best of them are what’s holding you back. Goddamn border is in sight and I see militia over there. They’ve fired at us. We’re going into the woods to pursue them there.”

“Okay, but get them. You are our last hope now.”



Dennis approached him quickly until he was standing over his brother, sneering at him. Ray lay at his feet with blood oozing from a stomach wound.

“Good to see you, Denny,” Ray said as he looked up at his brother. “I was sure we’d meet up.”

Dennis just glared at his brother, and then began to smile; a smile of satisfaction. “That’s really hysterical, little brother. I was thinking the very same thing: How nice it’d be to run into dear old Ray.” Dennis’s expression turned to anger. “I dreamed of this. You lying at my feet, dying at my hand.”

He expected Ray would plead for his life, but Ray calmly reached under his vest. Dennis was startled and raised his piece while Ray held out his hand in a friendly gesture.

"It's just an envelope," Ray said, as he reached out to his brother. "Open it."

"That again!"

"I realized you weren't ready for it the first time I showed you it. I didn't know then you'd start dreaming of us."

Dennis still had his weapon trained on Ray when he reached out and snatched the manila envelope. He undid the clasp while still keeping an eye on his brother. There were a dozen or so papers inside. The top one was titled DD214.

"They're your discharge papers." Dennis stared at them. "Do you remember, Denny? You've started dreaming of us, haven't you?"

Dennis looked perplexed. *How does he know about the dreams? No one but Teresa knows.* He continued to stare at the discharge paper.

"You were a Seal. Look at the next paper." Dennis did so, and began to read. "You were the best of 'em. That's Captain Miranda's commendation. You were the best he had. The Navy discharged you in favor of mercenaries, so you became one. Not just any soldier of fortune, mind you. You joined the French Foreign Legion. Hell, they recruited you."

Dennis was still bewildered and disbelieving. "This is impossible. I don't believe you. You're a goddamned liar. You always were. I remember everything from the time we were kids. You were always the favorite son. All the opportunities went your way. I hated you. You went into the Blues and I bounced around doing construction jobs."

Ray listened with amusement, even though the pain was relentless. "Construction, huh? What's a balustrade?" Dennis looked bewildered.

"You don't know, do you?"

Dennis grew angry. "I know what I did. I have a vivid recollection of everything."

"Look at the next paper."

Dennis reluctantly complied.

"Those are your medals and accommodations. You were in Africa, South America, and Europe. Then you heard about the Rust Belt War, and Redd Piper, and his Pilgrims in Oregon. You came home to help. You started the Lightning Squad to fight the RAC and the government that

declared war on its people. You know the ones: the by the people, of the people and for the people. Yeah, those ones. Then we started the Blues. The two of us. You were my hero, Dennis. Do you remember?”

“Liar,” screamed Dennis. “I never did any of those things. I have a vivid memory of everything I did.” Dennis began to calm down as he reflected on the only world he understood. “I was a failure. You did all those things—not me.”

Ray was amused. “Look at those documents. There are names and phone numbers. Check them out.” Ray began coughing up blood. “I think the end is near, so let me finish telling you what you’re starting to remember.”

“Wait,” Dennis said. “How do you know about my dreams?”

“They all have them. Sandra Casimir, those kids of that Haystack fellow—you know the one: ‘bring your devils to my camp and I’ll return to you little angels.’ Remember that one, Dennis? Then the ‘little angels’ started remembering. It only took them one or two months to remember.” Ray paused to look up at his brother. Dennis was still staring at the papers.

“Why do you think Casimir made you his number two man in the organization?”

“It’s just temporary.”

“Doesn’t matter. Think about it. Why would he do it?”

Dennis didn’t answer as he stared at the documents. Then he looked down at Ray. “It’s because of you. He figures I know you. Who better to put in charge? Furthermore, he knows how much I hate you and would want to capture you.”

“That’s not it at all,” Ray said, still smiling through the pain. “He doesn’t give a rat’s ass about us being brothers. He wanted only the best. The doctors told him that while you’d lose memories of your past, you wouldn’t lose the ability to react like you always did before. You’d be Legionnaire Dennis again. Genghis Kahn. Yeah, I heard. As soon as combat arose you’d instinctively know what to do. You went through Hell House, Den.”

Dennis was stunned. “No way, man; and how could you know Casimir called me that?”

“Dennis, listen to me. You do remember the story of the soldier that took nine months to—how do you put it—be treated?”

“Everyone at headquarters knows the story.”

“Well that soldier was you.”

“What! How do you know all this?”

“Because Teresa tells Casimir, Casimir tells Judy, and Judy tells me.”

Ray waited for the reaction.

“Wait! Back up! What’s this about Teresa?”

“I was coming to that. You were in Hell House, buddy. You were a soldier in the Blues. We kicked the RAC’s ass, but we were set up. We didn’t know about Casimir at this point. He disbanded us, but he kept you. You were taken to Hell House.” Ray coughed up some more blood, and stared at the oozing blood from his guts. Then he looked up at his brother and smiled. “You were a real pain in the ass to those pricks. You gave them holy hell, Den. They had to double the guard detail on you, but it wasn’t enough. They had you strapped to the chair—both arms and legs. It didn’t matter. You wrenched the whole chair, bolts and all, right out of the cement floor. Then you clobbered the doctor with the back of it. It took four guards to wrestle you down; then the nurse gave you an injection of something to knock you out.”

“No, I don’t believe you. You’re lying. You’re the biggest liar. You’ve always been that way. I ought to just finish you off right now.”

“Look at the last page of those documents. It’s your discharge from ‘Treatment’—Hell House. Look at the signatures at the bottom. Look at the patient. That’s you!” Dennis was horrified. “Look at the nurse. It’s Teresa Herrera. That is your wife’s maiden name isn’t it?”

Dennis nodded.

“She was attracted to you. She had a pretty crappy life and wanted you. She convinced Dr. Frankenstein—Eugene’s name for him—to plant in you a memory of you falling in love with her, and marrying her. A judge, bought and paid for, married the two of you right there in Hell House. He put into your memory the story of how you met. It isn’t real, Dennis. You have a real wife. Teresa was always deathly afraid you’d start remembering her, and remembering your real life. She reported every dream you had to Jaydan Casimir.” Dennis began sobbing.

“Do you remember Anna? She’s your real wife.”

“Anna? I heard about a woman named Anna that was killed in a road rage incident. I know that Casimir was having an affair with her.”

“That’s your wife. Casimir tried to do the same thing to her as he did to Catherine, but whereas Catherine killed herself to escape from Casimir and

protect Eugene, Anna tried to escape to the new country. She wouldn't have made it. Casimir got wind of the plot and sent some men to kill her. They wanted to make it look like road rage, but I beat them to the punch. I killed them, then staged the road rage incident and let Anna leave."

"I had dreams of a woman. We seemed close, but you're telling me that that woman was my wife?"

"Is your wife. She's waiting for you in New America. She figured that you'd wake up and realize who you really were, then you'd come home to her. She's waiting for you in the New World, waiting for you to come home."

"But why would Casimir think she's dead? There wouldn't have been any body."

"That's true. There was no body, but Casimir only cared that she was taken care of. Judy did that."

"What about Judy?"

"Judy was our spy. Casimir told her a lot, and what he didn't tell her, Judy found out because she monitored his phone calls. Then she reported to me. When I was sure Anna was safe I called Judy. She knew what was going on. She would have given Jaydan some bullshit story of how they made sure she was dead and local police took care of it."

"Judy is a spy? That bitch."

"You recruited her, bro," Ray said, nonchalantly.

"How do you know all this? Communications with New America are closed down. I know you have a special phone. I listened in on your conversations. You never talked to any Anna."

"So that's how you knew so much," Ray said, still smiling. "I used my own encrypted phone. Even Cass didn't know about it. I used it sparingly and late at night only."

Dennis, who had continued to aim at Ray, finally lowered his weapon, and began sobbing. "I don't know anything anymore."

"You will, Denny. Give it time. Search your dreams. Remember them. When Sandy did, she remembered more. She investigated and learned still more. Eugene will help you, and so will Chad Armstrong."

"Armstrong? Was I his leader?"

"More than that, Den. Do you know that when you're a Legionnaire, even when inactive, but in trouble, any legionnaire will come to your assistance? When you and I formed the Blues you needed their help.

Armstrong was your buddy. He came to help. So did Bones, Foote, and Wrenn. They're all Legionnaires. They're your friends. They're here because of you, not me. They charge me for their services, but not you."

"I can't believe this. I was this hero? They put me in Hell House? Oh my God! The dreams were coming more frequent. I stopped telling Teresa about each one because I didn't want to scare her."

"She knew they were becoming more frequent. She kept calling Casimir up and reporting your moods."

"But what about Teresa and Jerrell? I love them," he said, still weeping.

"It's a false memory. You were coerced into marrying her. She lied to you every day you've been together. New America won't recognize that coerced marriage. Your real wife is there. You have a son and a daughter too. The boy is about fifteen now, and the girl is about eight. They're waiting for you. They just think you're here, bringing down the government or something. They don't know about you now. Anna didn't want to tell them. They weren't ready for Hell House. No one is."

Dennis continued to stare at the documents and sobbed.

"Look, Denny...." He winced from the pain. "I don't have much time left. You must cross the border. Don't look back, and, for heaven's sake, don't go back. They're going to know about your encounter with me. They already know you're starting to remember. You want to know the truth about Alt House? It wasn't set up for Eugene. If they catch him they'll probably just throw him back into Joliet, and then execute him. Alt House was built for you. Once you go back, they'll stick you back in there. Let me die in peace, Denny. Promise me you'll go there; go back to your real wife and kids."

Dennis, as tears now streamed down his cheeks, put his gun away. "I'm sorry I shot you, Ray. I didn't know."

Ray was smiling through the pain. "Go now, while you can."

But Dennis reached down and grabbed his brother.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking you with me. I'm not leaving you here to die alone."

"I can't leave Cassandra."

"I'll come back for her."

"No, Den...." It was the last words he would ever speak.



Eugene and Sandy heard shots all around them, one whizzed by Eugene's left ear. Sandy gave a holler, but once again she only stumbled. The two were running faster now since their brief rest.

"Okay, to the road."

"I'm scared," yelled Sandy.

"If we're near the border gate, we can get help from them."

"Where are Chad and the others?"

"I don't know."

Sandy feared the worst.

More gunfire, but now it was to their left. *Maybe they don't know we've changed direction*, Eugene thought. *One thing I know is I want to make it. I want to live. I want this New World.*

Sandy gave a holler. Gene feared the worst, but it was a holler of joy. They had reached the road, and they were only about twenty yards from the border. Eugene turned around and didn't see anyone. It looked like they'd make it for sure. A militiaman at the gate motioned for them to run; then he yelled "GET DOWN!"

They both dropped to the pavement. Gunshots rang out from behind them, then gunshots from the border guard.

A man yelled, "COME! QUICKLY! RUN! FASTER!"

They were about ten yards away from freedom, then, just as suddenly, "GET DOWN! QUICKLY! ALL THE WAY DOWN!" More gunfire from both sides.

The gunfire stopped, but no one told them to get up. Suddenly, a different voice said, "Get up!"

Eugene and Sandy looked up, and Gene's mouth opened. "Stu!"

"Hello, Eugene." Stuart Everson stood on the other side of the border with a dead militiaman at his feet. Everson held a small handgun at his side, barrel pointing at Eugene.

Eugene and Sandy got up slowly; Eugene looking at Stu, quizzically. "Stu, what's this about?"

"Who is he?" Sandra asked.

"My boss and my friend."

“Hello, Mrs. Casimir.”

Sandy was confused. “Since when does a friend hold a gun on a friend?”

“We are friends, right, Stu?” Eugene said, a bit unsure of things.

“Come over here, Mrs. Casimir. Your husband is very worried.”

“No. I’m not going back. He coerced me into marrying him and killed my husband. I’m not going back! I’m never going back!” Sandy’s face was red and stained with tears.

“What’s this about, Stu?”

“What do you think it’s about, Eugene? You shouldn’t have gotten involved with those two. You had a good life here. Maybe you still can.”

“You mean Hell House, don’t you? Were you responsible?” Stu just stood nonchalantly in front of them. His gun was still pointing at Eugene. Then Stu cleared his throat.

“I suppose I owe you an explanation. I work for Alberto Martinez. Do you know who he is?”

Eugene frowned and breathed as hard as when he was running. He just nodded affirmatively. “He’s the head of NOGOV,” said Eugene.

“He’s the most powerful man on earth,” Stu said. “He’s more powerful than the President, Congress; oh, hell he is the government. He’s the government, the courts, the media. He’s everything. He’s God on earth.”

Sandra’s mouth was agape. Eugene felt defeated. “I just don’t understand, Stu,” Eugene said. He was desponded, defeated, and teary-eyed. “You were my friend.” His voice was broken, but he continued through the sobs. “You were so kind to me when Catherine died. You offered me a promotion. We ate at your house. Why? I don’t understand.”

For a moment Stu started to lower his weapon and felt the sting of regret; but then he rubbed his face, raised his weapon, and looked stern. “Stop this behavior. It’s indignant. Our so-called friendship was at the insistence of Alberto Martinez. He wanted to win you over; win you away from Zinney. I was the carrot, but now I’ve got the stick,” he said with a smile. Eugene’s head was lowered. Sandra grabbed hold of Eugene and put her head on his shoulder. Stuart continued.

“I’ve known Al for a long time. He led a group of crime lords. He was involved in drugs, gambling, and prostitution. I was his lieutenant. One day Al comes to me with his brilliant idea. Why not make all this legal? No sneaking around; no hiding from the FBI; no hiding from ATF. Make it all

legal, and make more money than ever. There was just one problem. He was small-time to NOGOV. It was run by another Mafia guy who legitimized himself by taking over the banking system. Name was Solariano. Martinez knew him, and got himself in NOGOV as his security chief. When he became President of NOGOV he was in a position to get Congress to change the laws. First he got the business community to see this as a way to start making money again. They would have done anything. Congress passed the law legalizing all this stuff; Martinez financed my little company; he got a kickback; and I'd owe him a favor or two." Everson stopped to check Eugene's reaction.

"Is this the favor he wanted? Bring me back?"

"That's only the second favor. The first was to make you my number two. I didn't like that idea. Rodriguez was a good man. You were a problem. That silly little populist head of yours," he said with a sneer. "When you frowned at my proposal I was ready to storm right on out of there, but I couldn't. I promised Al you'd be my second in command. He arranged to finance Raul's startup in the same business in another city. He had to be replaced. It had to be you. He told me to offer you a house in the fortress if you hesitated at taking the job. It was way more than you deserved."

Eugene was mortified. "But the lawyer. You got me a lawyer to protect me. He's the one who made trouble for Casimir."

"I never got you any lawyer. I just told you that so you'd go anywhere I wanted. Then I got a great idea—stick you in Hell House—only I wasn't supposed to know about that. I had to figure out how to convince Casimir to stick you in there. So I pretended to be the lawyer. Created quite a mess," he said with a sneer. "Leaked your situation to the part of the press that Martinez didn't control. It did the rest. Then Casimir figured out what to do before Martinez did."

"You bastard!"

"The truth is, Eugene, I always hated you. You whiney little populist shit."

Everson turned toward the woods. "Captain!"

Kostroma and two of his men came out of the woods, wearing big grins on their faces. Kostroma whipped out his pocket phone and pushed his contact button. "Mr. O'Reilly, Kostroma here."

(Pause) “Yes sir, I have them. Mr. Everson was responsible. It went just as you planned. They were only thirty feet from the border. He was our last hope.”

(Pause) “Well, that is good news sir. I’ll relay that to Mr. Everson. Are you on your way, sir?”

(Pause) “Great! I’ll have them frisked and ready to be brought back.”

Kostroma turned to Stuart Everson. “Mr. O’Reilly killed his brother and his wife. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“What about those other Blues? Armstrong and his friends?”

Kostroma just shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Take them in the woods and frisk them.”

“Hold your arms up,” said Kostroma to Eugene and Sandy. “March,” he said pointing to the woods.

They re-entered the woods on the north side. Armstrong, Foote, and Wrenn weren’t coming to the rescue. There were still shots being fired in the distance. It looked bad for the two of them. Eugene was mortified. If Pamela’s exposé on Old America’s future wasn’t enough to convince Eugene of the reality of the world he had longed for, then Everson’s betrayal was the final nail in the coffin for any desire to return. And they were so close. Kostroma disarmed Eugene just as Dennis O’Reilly pulled up in Sandy’s rental.

Dennis, who was not smiling, got out, and turned to Stuart Everson. “Good job, sir. I can’t thank you enough for your cooperation.”

“Take them both to Alt House,” Everson said. Dennis looked perplexed and Sandy began crying.

“But Alt House is closed,” Dennis said.

“Not anymore. Martinez’s orders. Apparently they fixed their problem. Well sort of. They’re guessing at the right dosage of some drug. Keeps them from dreaming. You two,” pointing at Eugene and Sandy. “You belong to Martinez now. I just let him know I have you. He’s personally taking charge.”

Sandy screamed. “No. I’m not going back. I’m not going back to Jaydan ever again. I’d rather die out—”

“Cut the dramatics girlie. You aren’t going back to your husband. Martinez has other plans for you. Smile now,” Everson said to Sandy. “Just think, you’ll be the wife of the most powerful person on earth.” Sandy

screamed in horror. Eugene was hangdogged. Dennis whipped out a pair of cuffs. "Put your hands behind your back," he demanded.

Dennis circled around back of them with handcuffs in hand. By this time Everson had put his gun away and Kostroma and his men had lowered their weapons as well. Dennis cuffed the despondent pair and led them towards the car that Sandy recognized as her own.

Dennis turned to Martinez's right hand man. "Oh, Mr. Everson, there's just one more thing." Everson faced Dennis, confusedly. Dennis raised his Colt and shot Everson dead. Then he fired three more shots at Kostroma and his men before they realized what was going on. Dennis walked over to them, and now, with a wink and a smile said, "Let's go see that New World."

CHAPTER 29:

THE BEGINNING

Dennis, Eugene, and Sandy crossed the border into New America. While Sandy could feel nothing but relief and joy, Eugene was bemused and bewildered. Looking at Dennis, Eugene said, “What the shit is going on?”

Dennis laughed and told the two the story of his own entrapment and visit to Hell House. As he finished relaying Ray’s dying words to him, a familiar woman emerged from the shadows with the border administrator who was hiding in his office after the guard was killed.

“Do you still remember me, my husband?”

“Anna?”

Anna smiled and ran to Dennis. She hugged him, and Dennis returned the hug, although his memory of her was still a bit fuzzy.

Sandra smiled but Eugene was still a bit unsettled. Dennis turned toward them with a smile. “I understand everything now.” Memories of her began flooding back into his consciousness. Dreams became reality. The past happily married the present. Dennis was home again. What had become his reality only minutes ago faded from memory. That time now felt like the dream.

Sandra smiled. She understood. Her life with Jaydan Casimir now felt like a bad dream. She would have no life with Fernando Menendez, but she knew she would have one with Eugene Sulke. Only one thing could mar the new reality. Where were their friends and protectors?

As Dennis and Anna reunited, and Sandra and Eugene looked at each other, they heard a noise from behind them. “Well, well, well,” Jack Wrenn said, wearing a broad grin. “I was afraid you two might not make it. Are Ray and Cass here?”

The two ran over to him. Sandy gave him a great big hug, and then Terry Foote came out, a bit bedraggled, but in one piece. Finally, Chad Armstrong came out. Eugene and Sandy hugged all of them. Then Chad came over to them. “Ray and Cassandra here?”

Eugene started to answer, but Dennis interrupted him.

"I can explain," Dennis said. The three just stared at him. Chad had his hand on his weapon, and then he saw Anna.

"He's back boys."

"You must be Chad Armstrong," Dennis said as he extended a hand. Armstrong paused and slowly extended his own. "I recognized you from the photograph of you and from my dreams, though you were a bit fuzzy."

Armstrong looked confused until Dennis explained how Ray convinced him of his capture and torture in Hell House. Dennis pulled out the manila envelope and handed it to Chad. He opened it and looked at the documents he was already familiar with. Wrenn and Foote came over and looked at the Legionnaire one. They all began grinning.

"There's still a lot he doesn't remember, but he's back with us now," Anna said.

"Really, Den. It's really you?" Armstrong said.

"It was painful to learn that the life I knew was a lie. I can't describe it. They recreated a whole career—hell—a whole life's story for me. They took away the person I was. I was convinced I was a failure; a nobody. I got to tell you guys though. I was the one behind all the harassment. I was working for Jaydan Casimir to capture you. Martinez ordered your deaths. I shot my own brother and his wife before I knew the truth. Ray's like a piece of chiseled granite. It takes him a long time to die."

"He is that," Chad said.

"Can you ever forgive me for what I've done to all of you?"

"You couldn't help it, man," Armstrong said. "They stuck the brain probe on you. It's me who should be asking for forgiveness."

"Yeah," Terry Foote said. "We failed. We searched and searched for you, but we couldn't find you."

"We never gave up," Jack Wrenn said. "At least until you resurfaced all fucked up and all."

"Thanks, guys, for sticking by me."

"Let me know where you left Ray and Cassandra," Armstrong said.

Dennis just indicated the car he drove up in. "They're in there, along with Pamela Piper."

The car was still sitting outside the border fence. The Blues looked inside and saw the bodies.

“I called Mayor Piper,” said the administrator. “He was waiting for you at another border crossing. He’s on his way now, along with about half the journalists in the country. You’re about all anyone has talked about for more than a week now.”

Someone drove up the road from behind the office. “Maybe that’s the mayor now?”

But it wasn’t the mayor. A somber-looking woman exited the vehicle and walked over to everyone. “I heard you guys were here. Is my husband still with you?” She looked around, frowning.

“Who is your husband?” the administrator asked.

“Senator Everson Moore.”

“Oh, my God,” Sandra shouted, as she covered her mouth. Everyone just stared at her.

“He twisted or broke his ankle running through the woods,” Eugene said. “We had to leave him behind.”

Mrs. Moore began crying. “Oh, God. They’re going to stick him in that awful place again. I’ll lose him for good, now.”

Chad came over. “We’ll look for him ma’am.”

The three Blues started down the road. “Let me come with you,” Dennis said. “If you get caught I can pretend to have captured you. You’ll be safe.”

“No,” said Chad. “Your place is with your wife and family now.”

“What if there are more guys out there?” Eugene pleaded. “Let me go with you.”

Armstrong smiled. “Thanks, Gene, but the woods are clear. Besides, you’ve got a new life now; not to mention someone who loves you,” motioning to Sandra, who was talking to Mrs. Moore. “The only thing from you I need is where you last saw the senator.”

“We left him in the north woods when we were running toward the road.”

“Hey, you guys,” said the administrator. “Use the scooter cart. It’ll be faster, and if you need to carry the Senator, this’ll come in handy.”



Earlier That Night

Senator Everson Moore fought the pain as he moved slowly to a large tree. He leaned up against it, still holding the Berretta he had with him. He could hear voices ahead and behind him, but no one was coming for him. In time they moved farther west, until he could hear them no more. All he could do was crawl, dragging his painful foot. He knew he had several miles to go, but reasoned that he could make it in ten or twelve hours.

He would periodically take ten minute rests; then start again. Hour after hour passed. *Where is everyone? It's so quiet. Are they still ahead of me? What if they retreated back to the gate? What if I've been wandering in the wrong direction? Oh, I can't bear it, but I won't die out here.*

Moore was sure he was moving west. He could see the North Star to his right. He reasoned that once he heard voices he would stop. Hour after hour passed and still there was silence. Then he heard voices and froze. He looked around for a tree to hide behind, but the voices grew closer. He couldn't move now. Any noise he made might be heard by the people he presumed would kill him or drag him back to Hell House.

As Moore sat in a frozen state, he could hear more clearly what the men were saying. He recognized one of the voices. *It's Armstrong. But what if I'm wrong? I must listen, carefully.*

"Jack," someone said.

Could it be Jack Wrenn? Oh, I need to be sure.

Then came the terrible realization that the voices were now moving away from him. If it was Armstrong he heard, this would be his chance for rescue. If he shouted after them, and he was wrong, it could cost him his life. *What do I do?*



Dennis approached Eugene, but he was looking at Sandra. Eugene was nonplussed when Dennis called over to her. "Hello, Sandy. Do you

remember me from the old neighborhood?” Sandy just stared at him without recognition.

“We were just kids the last time I saw you.”

“Dennis. Dennis O’Reilly. O’Reilly! I knew your name, but I never made the connection before.”

Dennis smiled. “They didn’t take away my childhood memories,” he said. “I always remembered you. I knew you before Gene did. I guess I had a thing for you. When you moved to Springfield, I tracked you down. One day I saw you talking to some boy. You were laughing and he was smiling. I turned back and went home.” Eugene just stood there stoically while Sandy looked surprised.

“I just figured that that was the end of that. I told a good friend of mine about it. I didn’t know it then, but he kept tabs on you. I think he liked you too. Anyway, one day he calls me up and tells me that you were in Joliet. I instantly saw the opportunity. This was when I knew Jaydan Casimir was seeing Catherine, but she was drinking heavily. She got real shit-faced and Casimir began souring on the relationship with her. So I got an appointment with the big guy—”

“Wait!” Gene said. “Weren’t you supposed to be just a Squad leader at the time? Why would the commandant of the whole Lightning Squad want to see you?”

“I talked my way in. I didn’t really need to, as I’ve come to understand. Anyway, I told him about Sandy, and he went to see her. You know the rest.”

“Now I understand how I came to know Sandy again after all these years,” Eugene said. “It wasn’t any coincidence. You were responsible. You tipped her off to Casimir, and ruined her life.”

“You have a right to hate me—both of you. I deserve your wrath. I ruined both your lives, and I killed my brother and his wife.”

Sandy saddened while Gene just stared at him.

“That’s right. I ruined a lot more lives. I wasn’t in my right mind, you might say. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Dennis,” Sandy said. “Once they change you, they can make you do anything they want.”

“Is it really you, Dennis? I mean the Dennis I knew as a kid; the Dennis I thought I knew when I went to your house?”

“There’s still a lot I don’t remember, but now I have accepted the fact of who I was and really am.”

“That day of the barbeque last August, were you telling me the truth about why you were watching over me?”

Dennis cast his eyes downward and then looked up at Eugene. His eyes looked saddened now. “No, I wasn’t. I just made up the excuse of your father’s run-in with the Squad. I needed an alibi. The truth is Casimir told me to keep an eye on you. I was supposed to keep you out of trouble; make sure you didn’t run off to New America or see Professor Zinney anymore.” Dennis hesitated and looked down.

“What?” Gene asked. “Something more?”

“I haven’t told you the worst of it yet.” Eugene just looked on and Dennis appeared reluctant to continue. Finally, he looked at Eugene with a pleading look.

“I’m sorry, Gene. I was supposed to ruin your marriage. But then I didn’t have to when she.... When you described your feelings about Catherine I just couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t do it. You would have gotten angry if I did. I had to wait for you to mention it first, and then I would have eased into that discussion. But things quickly spun out of control when you met Cassandra.”

Eugene looked down. “Why? Casimir could have her if he wanted. Why didn’t he do the same to her as he did to Sandy?”

“I don’t know. I just think he got more desperate with Sandy. Anyway, Ray and Cassandra were my bigger problem. Teresa warned me Ray would contact you. She and Ray wanted you to go to New America and write about the two countries.”

“I know. They wanted to start a revolution.”

“Anyway, Cassandra killed an entire squad and Casimir thought you joined her in a revolution against the country.”

“But why Dennis? I could never figure that out. Didn’t they know I was innocent?”

“Of course they did. They also figured you were pissed off and would talk. That made you dangerous. Dead people don’t talk.”

“Then why didn’t they kill me?”

“Commandant Casimir told me of his grand plan. First, he called your parents, telling them he was the company lawyer. He spilled the beans about you being in Joliet. I couldn’t tell you that, of course, when I was

taking you to your parents' home. Casimir told me that I was to claim I talked him into dropping the charges on you, and then, by taking you to your parents' home, I could win them over. All this was necessary for the grand part of the scheme." He hesitated. "You were supposed to undergo treatment. End of problem."

"What was your original plan to get me to Hell House? I guessed I fucked up those plans when I didn't come over."

"Yeah, you did. Had you come over I was going to take you to a friend's house. I still hadn't finalized the plan, but that so-called friend was Hell House."

"And you get promoted?"

"It's all making more sense to me now. I went through treatment and Casimir was assured I'd be of great help to him. That's why I was a part of all this scheming. I just wanted what Teresa wanted. Casimir wanted an ex-Blue as his number two man. He wanted to transform the Lightning Squad from policemen to an army, and take over the country from NOGOV. He's a billionaire too, and was a leader in NOGOV before adopting his own grandiose plans."

The administrator came over. "I don't suppose you remember me, Mr. O'Reilly. I'm Stuart. I was the first person you met on this side of the border."

Dennis smiled softly as he shook his hand, but he didn't remember him.

"It's okay, sir. I remember you, before they changed you. You escorted thousands of pilgrims over here. There are a lot more people you helped than you ever ruined."

Just then, Sandy spotted some people on the road. The administrator grabbed his binoculars. "It's your friends. They look like they have someone. He appears to be in bad shape."

A few minutes later, Armstrong, Wrenn, and Foote emerged from the shadows, riding the cart with the Senator on it. Instantly, Mrs. Moore ran across the border to greet her husband.

As Armstrong recrossed the border, Eugene went up to him. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah. A bit dehydrated and sore, but he'll be all right."

"Good." Eugene appeared to be searching for something.

"What is it, Eugene?"

“Why didn’t anyone tell me that Dennis went through Hell House? I mean, I started to think about that, but I figured you, Ray, or Cassandra would have told me.”

Armstrong put his hand on Eugene’s shoulder. “Ray didn’t want you to know. He didn’t know if he could ever get Dennis back, and he didn’t want you thinking that you could. Having been told of the close relationship with him....”

As Armstrong searched for the words Dennis came over. “What he’s trying to say, Gene, is that I was way too dangerous. He’s right. If you had lowered your guard or decided not to flee, I would have killed you.”

“But now you know the truth.”

Dennis smiled and nodded up and down. “Yeah. Thanks to Ray, I know the truth.”

“Hey, this is a time for celebration,” Armstrong said. “We need something for a toast.”

One of the guards said, “How about some bottled water?”

Armstrong guffawed. “Pass it around.” Everyone grabbed a bottle.

“What should we drink to?” Everson Moore said.

Everyone looked at each other, and then Chad said, “I know. Let’s drink to a new beginning.”

Everyone seemed to agree, and so they all raised their bottles of water and shouted, “To a new beginning.”

The administrator came over. “Henry Piper is on his way over. Pamela will be buried next to Redd Piper. Ray and Cassandra are heroes and will be buried in the Field of Honor, where men and women who died to make this country happen are laid to rest.”



As the first wisp of light graced the landscape with the promise of a new day, Sandra turned to Eugene, with a loving smile. “We’re home now.” She was still smiling as she interlocked her arm in his. Then she took a deep breath. “Feel that air.”

Eugene inhaled too. “It feels like the campground my father took me to when I was just a boy.”

“It feels like the park we walked through on the way to school,” she said.

Eugene smiled as he turned to her. “It feels like home.”

“Look!” Sandra said. “The cars!” Dozens of reporters from all over New America descended on the little border area to greet the new pilgrims. They wanted to know who these brave people were, and gain news of what they were fleeing.

The little group stared at the headlights coming around the bend. “God, I wish Pamela, Ray, and Cassandra could see this,” Armstrong said.

“Maybe they do,” said Anna, arm and arm with Dennis now.

“Hey, Eugene and Sandy! The welcome wagon’s here,” Wrenn yelled. But they didn’t hear him, as they were locked in a loving embrace. Freed from the dark forces that tormented them, the two found the love so savagely stolen away. Melting into each other’s arms, they found what they had lost all those terrible months ago.